

Little Nightmares

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Little Nightmares

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Summary

Will Graham, dour psychic and amateur criminal investigator, uses his abilities to assist Detective Jack Crawford in solving murders- often at great cost to his mental well-being. Six months after defeating the possessed brother of Occultist Historian Margot Verger, grisly, supernatural slayings are discovered all across London.

It seems the Devil himself is intent on recruiting Will for his own, and amidst a tangle of his own fears and the fragmented visions of brutal deaths, Will's only refuge is in the companionship of Doctor Hannibal Lecter; the elegant, cultured resident zoologist at the local museum.

A Penny Dreadful (Season 3) inspired AU.

Notes

This AU was all L's idea, and we had a great time writing it after I'd finished whining about the plot. The opportunity to put Will and Hannibal in their own little Penny Dreadful was too great to pass up. There will be historical inaccuracies, egregious use of 'darkness' synonyms, shameless vampire smut and a little dose of angst. Enjoy!

Chapter 1

The sound of the knock at the door echoes through the house, smothered in the synthetic gloaming of curtains and shutters despite the daylight outside. Traversing through the dust-cloth draped furniture in the gloom, Will Graham waits by the kitchen door for receding footsteps, frost blue eyes wide and aware behind his glasses, before he opens it and takes the basket of delivered groceries inside. One of the servants had made the delivery arrangements some weeks ago, before Will had dismissed them. Oh, Jack Crawford is still paying their wages, and they still come in to clean and mend every few days, but Will cannot stand having anyone about day and night.

Now, he stands in the kitchen and drains half the bottle of milk in one breath, devours a portion of dry bread, and then leaves the rest of the basket on the table and returns to his room. He crawls back under the covers, pulling them over his head. The fire is getting low but he is exhausted from the stairs, never mind that it's dead winter. Never mind that he's seen no one for weeks. Time is a different thing now. Living is a different thing. He wants none of it.

Sleep comes, and when he wakes it's to the sound of the doorbell ringing through the house.

"No one is at home," he groans into his pillow, but the bell goes again, and he begrudgingly pulls on a robe and traipses down. Despite avoiding every looking glass on the way, he knows he's a sight - pallid and unshaven and undressed. At the door, he pauses with his hand on the lock, wrestling his desire to keep it shut; to steal back to his room and retire from society for good. Why did Jack leave him here like this? Entertaining his callers is not Will's responsibility.

He jolts at the sound of a voice on the other side of the wood.

"Will. It's Margot Verger, would you open the door?"

It startles him enough that he remains frozen for a minute, until another knock, more insistent, rouses him. Sighing, he unlocks and opens the door a crack, hanging on to the deadbolt. From the look on Margot's face, he's in bad shape.

"If you don't mind my saying so, Will, I've seen the contents of sarcophagi that look healthier than you do."

"Kind of you to mention," he says stiffly.

"Will, let me in."

Avoiding her gaze, he steps back, and she pushes in smoothly, unblinking eyes serious as she regards him. Between her fastidious lace and accessories and his somewhat worn black robe, they make quite the picture.

"I've never seen you unshaven before," she remarks, with a tilt of her head.

"I'm trying something new. A bit impolite to comment, isn't it?"

"Somewhat improper to answer the door in a bathrobe, one might argue." She affects the same pseudo-Briticisms Will does in the climate. They have that much in common, at least.

He has no idea how she maintains her poise. Margot lost so much more than he, yet Will is still here floundering several months later. He wants to be angry with her about it. It was her brother they'd murdered, after all. Will's curse had saved them, perhaps, but it still haunts them all. Will can still feel the traces of it, clinging to him like a too-tight jacket. The demon still visits him readily in his dreams, baying for his blood, and its host's sister watches him now with matching jade eyes. He can see wisps of darkness clinging to her too when he focuses. Shaking his head at the thought, he finally clears his throat.

"To what do I owe the pleasure, Miss Verger?"

"I worry about you - after what we...after Mason..." She takes a breath. "I received a letter from Mister Crawford, saying that you had not been answering his correspondence."

Oh, so this is Jack's doing. Will curls his lip in realisation. Of course. "I have nothing to say to Jack at present. He knows that."

"He's just worried about you," she shrugs, "we all are."

"I'm not," Will sighs, turning and walking away, toward the drawing room.

"You're not worried? Will..." she follows him, voice taking on urgency now. "The shutters are drawn, it's like a mausoleum in here..."

"A funeral for my former life." Will collapses with a scowl into a wingback chair, flinching at his own dramatics.

Margot sits opposite him, closer than he'd like. "You have to deal with people again sometime."

"People shouldn't have to deal with me."

"Not looking or smelling like that," Margot says matter-of-factly, crossing her arms. "But, Will, some of us actually like you."

Will would like to bite back. To snap that the feeling isn't mutual; that he wants so badly to be left to rot: it would be more than he deserves. Instead, he blinks hard against the tightness in his throat. "I'm not well," he murmurs.

She sighs and closes her eyes for a moment. "You need to talk to someone."

"Who can I talk to about what we saw?" He lets out a derisive snort. "Who can I tell that the Devil walks the earth, waiting for me to find him? That his servants wear the skin of men, and make them monsters? That the only way to save their souls is to murder them?"

"The same person that I told."

That gets his attention. "You really - who?"

"A doctor, Will." He flinches away from the idea again. He's had quite enough of 'doctors'.

"Not that sort. An alienist. A woman. She's very kind."

"They all start out kind," Will mutters. He draws his legs up under him, wrapping his arms around his knees.

Margot gives him a slightly beseeching look. "Mister Crawford will pay, I'm sure. He believes in you."

"I have money," Will says curtly.

"Is that agreement?"

"No." He rubs his eyes. Margot's eyes narrow. He sighs. "I don't know how to do this. I'm not sure I deserve the help."

He watches her scowl at the words. "You deserve it." She seems so sure. She leans forward in her seat and touches his knee very gently. "Will. I won't deny your work is important, but I think you deserve to be free from your grief. I think Doctor Bloom can help." He is still resolved to say no until she says softly, "Please."

He looks away. "I'm a curse. I shouldn't be around people, anyway."

She makes a frustrated noise. "You certainly shouldn't before you next take a bath."

"So unladylike," he tells her.

"I could say the same for you." Will tips his head to the side. "Take a bath," Margot repeats, "go see my doctor. I will come back every day until you do."

"Very well." She continues to stare. "You meant now?" he snips when she does not move.

"I'd feel better knowing you had at least eaten before I leave."

He sighs and gets to his feet. Hopefully he can scrounge some bread and cheese without further comment. "Tea?" he offers, a touch curtly. The kitchen is as barren as the rest of the house.

"Tea sounds good, thank you."

He escapes from the sitting room without further delay. In the kitchen, he puts his hands on the counter and breathes through the terror that seeing her face had wrought upon him at her arrival. She can hardly help it, after all. Eventually, he drags himself to the sink to fill the kettle.

By the time he's boiled the kettle and scraped together a tea tray, he's mostly calm. Back in the reception room, he sets the tray down and curls back into his chair, drained from the

effort. Margot obligingly pours two cups.

"It is good to see you, you know," she tells him.

"And you, Margot." He can't believe her, but he's grateful. She gives him a tentative smile. Social niceties feel so foreign now, despite every intimacy they've shared. "I apologise for my - lack of decorum," he offers.

Margot bites her lip. "If there's anyone who understands..."

He nods. "I know. I'm sorry."

She smiles. They drink their tea in yawning silence for a few long minutes. Eventually, Margot fidgets with her sleeve. "I'd never seen anything like what you did in that house, Will. I knew you were special, but I didn't realise how singular you truly were. It must be a heavy burden, to walk hand-in-hand with death."

Will closes his eyes. "His hands are certainly cold."

"I imagine they are."

The thought makes him sigh. "I used to think I walked hand-in-hand with God," he whispers. "I can't remember when he let go."

Thinking back on it hurts too much. He pushes it away; sips his tea. Maybe he should see this doctor. Anything but be trapped alone in his mind again, remembering all the times he's been trapped in it with someone else. Yes, he'll go. It can't possibly make things worse. He sighs and looks at Margot. "Do you have a card?"

She dimples, satisfied with that sign of success. "I do, in fact."

It's heavy stock, tastefully embossed in professional black type. Will turns it over. "All right. I promise one session, no more."

"That's good enough for now." She studies him over the rim of her teacup. "You will at least shave?"

He itches his cheek. "I might."

"Good."

He gives her a meaningful look, and then sags. "Thank you for coming."

"I told you, Will. I was worried."

"I... apologize." He knows it doesn't sound very convincing.

"Just keep in touch with me, all right?" Her eyes are warning. "And answer Mister Crawford."

He ignores that last part, as it is precisely what he doesn't want to do. The newspapers Jack typically takes still pile up at the door every day, and when Will gathers them for burning, he sees the headlines even when he attempts not to. It's only a matter of time until Will finds himself drawn in to their horror yet again.

Margot insists on helping him tidy away the tea things, eyeing the state of the kitchen skeptically. Finally, he walks her to the door.

"Take care of yourself, Margot," he says, failing to keep the protectiveness out of his voice-though what he's protective of now, he doesn't know. She has her estate, and Mason is long buried.

"Take your own advice," she tells him. Her hand catches his before the door closes, shockingly warm.

When she's gone, Will props his forehead against the wooden panel and sighs. A bath. He can do that. But first, he has to heat water.

After painstakingly filling the iron bath in the kitchen, Will discards his robe and spectacles and sinks into it in front of the fire. He dips under to wet his hair and soaps himself slowly as the firelight makes the walls animated, reflecting off the bright surface of pans and glasses. The familiar motions keep his mind occupied, but it's only when he's immersed in the hot water up to his mouth that he relaxes minutely; feels his aches recede. Perhaps he should have tried this before. The shave will have to wait until tomorrow. He thinks he might even sleep easily, which is novel.

He releases a deep breath at the thought, letting himself sink low in the water, closing his eyes. The heat dissolves away his very thoughts and his mind wanders, his senses probing the edges of the house as they always do without his careful counsel, creeping along the windowsills and toward the roof. With all silent around him, it's easy to do. His mind rushes along the rooftops, taking in the clouds and the pigeons - and then the eyes, and the teeth.

With a gasp, he comes back to himself, water sloshing over the edge of the tub with his movement. His heart pounds in his chest, fingers clenching around the lip of the tub. He gets out of the water in a hurry. The sloshing surface takes on the sudden, fleeting look of a vast pool of blood. It makes him stumble back, standing against the table with a bath sheet clutched to his stomach. He breathes hard, and clenches his eyes shut.

When he opens them he's just standing in the kitchen, shivering, with a pool of water around his feet. He swears softly, thinking of the card Margot gave him. Something has to be done.

*

When he wakes the next day, he resolutely dresses and shaves himself and retrieves the card from the hall table. His first venture outside in many weeks, he hesitates on the doorstep at the chill of the Autumn city air before pulling down the brim of his hat and starting on. Shoulders tight, he walks the relatively short distance to the street listed on the card, pushing into a stately townhouse type building with an ornate black door.

Inside, the space is clean and neutral, and the secretary looks up at him with neutral disinterest on his bespectacled face. Will braces himself for politeness he does not feel. "Is Doctor Bloom available? A patient of hers referred me."

"She's with a patient, but you can wait if you like."

"I would like. Thank you."

"Take a seat, sir." He seems to immediately dismiss Will from his mind, which honestly is preferable.

He waits, and when the door opens, the doctor emerges with her patient. He can immediately tell which woman the alienist is just from her aura of self-possession. She's dark-haired, modestly dressed and friendly-faced. Will immediately likes her, to his chagrin. She ushers her patient to the door personally, then turns that open gaze on Will.

"You don't have an appointment," she says, though it's not admonishment.

"No, I don't. I'm a referral."

"Oh, from whom?"

"Margot Verger," Will murmurs.

Doctor Bloom angles her pretty head at him. "Are you William Graham?"

"I see she's mentioned me," he says dryly, feeling himself color.

"Come into my office, let's talk."

"If it's not a bad time -"

"It's not a bad time, Mister Graham." Will nods tightly and stands, following her into her private office. Doctor Bloom gestures to a pair of chairs. "Shall we sit?"

"Thank you." He sits himself down after removing his coat and hat. She waits for him in her own seat, neat and demure and unimposing, but alert, almost intimidatingly so. Will feels the absurd impulse to cover his eyes so she can't look at them. He focuses on her hands, clasped in her lap.

"Why did you come and see me today, Mister Graham?"

"Because Miss Verger asked me to."

"She's been worried about you."

"She... talks about me?"

"Occasionally."

"Well," he sighs and rubs his forehead, "I don't expect you to disclose details of what she's discussed with you but... you know what happened to us?"

"I know Miss Verger's version of what happened."

"And you believe her?"

"She doesn't need me to believe her."

Will folds his arms. "That is not what I asked."

"I believe she saw what she said she did, yes."

He has a sudden burst of fear that this is all some sort of trick, but quickly controls himself. "She did," he says, curtly. "And several other people did as well."

"I can tell this is something you'd like to discuss," Doctor Bloom demurs.

"I think it'd be better if I started from the beginning."

She nods, spine still enviably straight. "As you wish."

Will shifts in his seat, wondering for a moment where the beginning really is. When did it start to feel like the walls were closing in, he wonders.

"When I was a young man, I was committed to a hospital," he starts, weary at the thought. "I've always had - sensitivities. What some called powers."

"Clairvoyance?"

"If you like."

"I see. Something triggered your committal, though?"

Will bites his lip. "Several things."

"Would you like to tell me about it?"

Will pauses. "Wouldn't you like to tell me if you're interested in treating me first, Doctor?"

"Of course I am, Mister Graham. I told Miss Verger as much. Any friend of hers." That gives him a moment of pause. She smiles sympathetically. "You do not offer your trust easily, I can tell."

"Telling the truth usually gets me in bad places." He makes himself meet her eyes.

"I just want to hear your story," she tells him gently. "You seem very unhappy. I'd like to help you fix that."

Maybe it's the seeming impossibility that makes him decide to trust her. He's silent for several moments, trying to step on a dozen rolling pennies of thought so that he might choose

where to begin. In his mind, he flips a coin, and takes a breath.

"When I was a young man, I committed a crime, and as a result I was disowned. I believe it triggered some sort of change in me."

She doesn't ask about the crime. "What kind of a change? In your...gifts?"

"Gifts." Will curbs his sneer. "If you like. Psychic abilities. I was quite mad for a time, and in that time I believe I was touched by the Devil. It opened a rift in me that I haven't yet been able to close."

"How often do these abilities manifest to you?" Doctor Bloom inquires.

Will closes his eyes. "Almost constantly."

"Nightmares? Hallucinations? Visions of other sorts?" The way she says it, it's quite clear she's angling for symptoms of a rather more earthly set of ailments. Voices of his own invention, perhaps.

Will sighs. He reaches out a hand. "Indulge me for a moment, Doctor."

She hesitates only briefly before giving him her hand, meeting his eyes steadily when she does. Will looks into her soft, appealing face, and then closes his own eyes, the pendulum swinging behind closed lids. As he reaches, he can feel the borders of her; the fractured images of the things she thinks of when her mind is without occupation. As always, he has the urge to pull out the most painful thing he sees. But no. He needs something secret. Something small. Something she's never told anyone.

"That redheaded housekeeper at your lodgings in medical school," Will starts. He opens his eyes. Doctor Bloom stares right back. "She really liked you, you know. You didn't have to say what you did."

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees her hand tighten on the arm of her chair. "What do you think I said to the housekeeper?"

"It was just a kiss," he sighs, "you haven't felt the same way about many other people since." The dart of anger in Doctor Bloom's eyes is not entirely unexpected. He looks for something less emotional. "You buried a box at the bottom of the garden when you were a child. You still wonder if anyone ever found it. You put your journal in there, a penny too."

"Enough," she murmurs.

He sits back immediately, hands in his lap, squeezing his own knees to stifle the tremor as he shakes her mind off like cobwebs. "See?" he says. "It's disturbing, even when I keep it inside."

The Doctor gives him a slow once over, expression now a touch afraid- and a little too much like sad for comfort. "What about the other things I've mentioned?" she asks quietly.

"Nightmares," he says, softly.

"Waking visions?"

"I sometimes see things that come to pass."

She nods, looking thoughtful. He looks down at his hands, waiting. "So this has been going on for a long time, then?"

"Since I was... eighteen."

"And you were committed at that age?"

"Shortly after."

She folds her hands in her lap again. "May I ask for what?"

"I had a lover, too." She raises a brow. "We had a falling out and he went to my father for money," Will murmurs, the lie spilling easily from his tongue until he feels her sympathy wash over him.

"That must have felt like a huge betrayal, as a young man."

"My father disowning me and installing me in a sanitarium was rather more of one."

She bows her chin in concession. "And after?"

Will shifts. "I was treated, and became largely catatonic for several months."

Her hands jerk a little in her lap. "I see."

"I doubt it."

She shifts her posture, and he can feel her eyes roaming over him. "I am a trained doctor, Mister Graham," she says curtly.

"Yes, well, forgive me if I don't find that reassuring."

"I don't believe in surgical solutions to problems of the mind, Mister Graham. That is why I became an alienist." Her gaze is hard.

He smiles humourlessly and rubs his mouth. "Of course." After another pause, one he can tell she's allowing to grow and become burdensome, he speaks again. "The fact remains that it was unsuccessful. My mental maladies have only increased, and the past weeks have been -" He pauses. Swallows. "I've not been feeling myself."

"Understandable, with the strain from recent events."

He nods. All at once, it feels like too much inside him. His eyes burn with the strain of staying dry.

Doctor Bloom looks at him steadily. "Tell me what you're feeling, Mister Graham."

"Hopeless."

She tilts her head. "How do you view yourself?"

He closes his eyes, lets his head tip back. "A waste."

"Of what?"

"Space, time, effort." He laughs sadly. "Mostly mine. I try not to burden others."

"You saved Miss Verger's life," Alana murmurs, "and I believe the life of several other people."

He sighs. "Yes."

"That doesn't sound like a waste of anything, to me."

"Well, you asked how I viewed myself," he points out sourly.

"I'm allowed to disagree, aren't I? You're an educated, well-intentioned man. On paper, there's nothing wasteful about you either."

"We don't live on paper."

"No, we don't." She takes a deep breath. "I do not know yet what will help you, Mister Graham. I do not know if I can. But I would like you to return next week. And in the meantime, I would like you to try something for me, if you will."

"What's that, Doctor?"

"Go out and do something that you will enjoy. Just one thing." Will pulls a face and Doctor Bloom gives him a knowing look. "Is it the going out among people, or the prospect of genuine engagement?"

"Can't have one without the other."

"A shame," she says dryly.

He sighs. "A thing I like. All right. I'll try."

"Good. Could I ask you to speak to my assistant about a regular appointment time?" Will nods, getting to his feet. She does as well, ushering him to the door of her office. "I'd like to see you more than once a week, if that's agreeable, Mister Graham."

It's not, but he recognizes the need. "Very well." He looks to the assistant. "Sir?"

He raises his head.

"Three appointments per week, Renfield," Doctor Bloom tells him. "Find the time. Move Lady Arnham if you must."

He nods his head in agreement.

Will looks back to Doctor Bloom. "Thank you for seeing me on such short notice, and for being uh... accommodating."

"You are quite welcome, Mister Graham. Good luck with your assignment."

She closes her door after bidding him a final goodbye. Will makes his appointments and leaves, mentally weighing the feeling in his chest as he goes. 'Better' isn't the first word that comes to mind. Just different. He feels changed by the conversation in some small way. It makes him feel a little less like he's being hatefully regarded by every person he passes. Instead he's back to feeling largely invisible. Like the scarlet brand he feels on his heart isn't burning on his breast for all to see. He finally understands why Margot suggested Doctor Bloom- why she thinks she might benefit him. Will wonders if she might, too.

He doesn't divert straight home, as a result. He plans to fulfill Doctor Bloom's challenge. He's not far, in this neighborhood, from what was one of his favorite places when he first arrived in London. The Natural History Museum is much changed, many parts still under construction. It means the interior will be quiet, he thinks. A respite from passers-by and a place he enjoys as well. He thinks he's found a loophole in Doctor Bloom's homework. Feeling vaguely smug, he strolls out of the entry hall into the maze of corridors, his coat draped over his arm.

He moves from one towering room to another, walking amongst the bones and rocks, through to the taxidermy suite where the wolves and hunting cats are crouched among fake greenery. The menace remains, even in their rictus snarls and flashing glass eyes. Will always has had a fondness for animals, dead or living. They always had dogs when he was a boy. He reaches out to touch gingerly now, nostalgic for the feeling of fur.

"I think they frown on that here," an amused voice says from behind him.

Will drops his hand, sheepish. "I thought he looked lonely," he says, not quite hitting dry.

"A predator among predators? Perhaps."

Will turns to see who's standing next to him. Pristinely dressed, severe-faced but pleasant looking. The stranger reminds Will all too much of the mounted cats before them. Something about the alertness in his golden-brown eyes, perhaps. He looks utterly at ease here, while Will is instantly on edge.

"So far away from home," Will murmurs, looking at the wolves again and adjusting the angle of his spectacles. "Seemed a shame."

"You are as well, sir, if it is not rude to comment on the evidence of my ears."

"I could say the same for you."

The slightest of smiles crosses the man's face. "And you would be correct. Doctor Hannibal Lecter, at your service."

"Mister William Graham," Will dips his chin.

"A pleasure. I hope you'll forgive my interruption - I'd be honored if you'd join me on my walk through the museum."

Will regards him mistrustfully. "Do you work here, Doctor?"

"As a matter of fact, yes."

"What is it that you do?"

"I am a visiting lecturer in the zoology department." Doctor Lecter gestures gracefully at the animals flanking them.

"What's your specialty?"

"Hunting patterns of pack carnivores," Doctor Lecter says promptly. "I am working on a treatise."

Will tilts his head. "Very interesting. What are your findings so far?"

Doctor Lecter smiles. "How long do you have?"

"My calendar is blissfully empty. Or tragically, depending on how you look at it."

"I believe your first description is probably indicative of your own opinion?"

"You might say that."

Doctor Lecter inclines his head. "I defer to your pleasure, Mister Graham."

"In that case, it would be my pleasure to accompany you." He thinks the man looks legitimately pleased, but there's something vaguely unsettling in his very correct posture.

They walk, both quietly regarding the exhibits. Will stops at the birds of prey, the flashing glass bringing back memories he'd rather not acknowledge.

"What are you thinking about, may I ask?"

Will glances at the Doctor, surprised. "Talons."

"What about them?"

"The feel of them."

"I see," the doctor's stoic expression registers some intrigue.

Will gives him a thin smile. He most certainly does not see, but Will is not feeling inclined to be gentle. The Doctor watches him with his expression converging on that which Will recognizes as apprehension.

"You look like you know the feeling."

"From my dreams," Will murmurs.

"Is it being pierced you dream of, or piercing things?"

Will snaps back to attention at the odd question. Doctor Lecter looks unaffected, but there's a keenness in his eyes. "It depends."

"On what, might I ask?"

"You can ask."

He gets a soft smile in response. It's irritatingly charming. "I'm a scientist, Mister Graham, you must know an unanswered question will only entice me more."

"If you're a scientist, I suppose you know how to live with disappointment as well."

"I usually disregard it in favour of a renewal of strategy."

Will laughs sharply. "I can believe you do."

They keep walking, coming to a stop at a wall of pinned species; bats and insects and moths. Will steps close, feeling Doctor Lecter's presence at his shoulder. "Little nightmares," Will says softly. Doctor Lecter regards them fondly.

"Some of course are a genuine nuisance, but they're often helpful creatures, reviled for their looks. Greatly misunderstood for the most part, I believe."

"Misunderstood, yes." Will studies a jewel bright beetle. "I always think they look like miniature machines."

"Perhaps. They've evolved to be efficient, surely."

"I didn't say I didn't admire it. Makes me think of God at a drafting desk."

Doctor Lecter laughs softly. "An admirable way to blend theories. I think insects are the things he got right. A mind small enough not to turn on itself, a body strange enough to survive most."

Will lets his teeth sink into his lower lip while he thinks. "Humans are the only things with minds big enough to turn on themselves."

"Yes, we are unique in that." Doctor Lecter gives him another little smile, not the pitying thing Will is used to. Will takes a breath and returns it. "Unique in many other things too," Doctor Lecter continues.

Will nods, eyes going back to the specimens. He sighs at the leathery wings of pipistrelles; tiny, white scorpions poised to permanently attack. The doctor lets him look in silence, now.

"So small, and they still have more armour than us."

"We produce our own if we have need of it."

Will smiles wryly to himself. "Not always. Not enough."

"Ah, you're still referring to battles of a different nature."

"I suppose I am."

"Battles you win?"

"The verdict is not yet in on that."

"I'm sorry to hear it."

Will squares his shoulders. "Is there another exhibit you'd like to visit, Doctor?"

"Of course. This way." He hesitates and Will gets the impression that he is considering offering his arm. But in the end he does not, and Will merely follows at his side. He considers prodding at him mentally but decides it would be rude. Anyway, the inevitable staring into space or over-stimulated recoil is always difficult to explain.

"What did you choose?" he asks instead.

"The sea life hall, I thought."

Will nods in approval and allows himself to follow along and listen. Surrounded by the shells of gleaming and spiky little creatures, he relaxes. Doctor Lecter is very still and very calm, voice low and melodic with his accent as he offers lyrical explanations to various examples of the more unusual examples. Will still isn't sure why he approached, but perhaps the man is simply whiling away some time. It's not unpleasant.

"What's your favourite creature?" he asks Will eventually.

Will looks around them at all the different cases. "Domestic or wild?"

"We're all wild creatures at heart, aren't we? Both, I suppose."

Will smiles, thinking. "Dogs," he says finally. "That is the easy answer."

"Loyal," Doctor Lecter observes.

"Yes, they are." Will murmurs it absently.

"Protective, too. Keen."

Will thinks it over. It's something he's sorely missing in his life. In the people in his life. When he looks up, Doctor Lecter watches him. He seems not-quite nervous, bordering on coy. It makes Will's smile a bit sharp. "They're kind, too." It's an entirely too revealing answer, more thorough than he can imagine the doctor wanted.

"Where man is not," he surmises, "you have any of your own?"

"Nah, too far from home right now."

An understanding dip of the Doctor's handsome chin. "And so I find you seeking the company of creatures of the night. Perhaps you feel a kinship."

"But they are dead, and I remain alive. It's enough to drive me to envy some days." Will's ears pink at his own admittance. He hasn't meant to be so outspoken. The doctor remains unruffled, though.

"There's something quite beautiful about them, isn't there? Something awful and alluring."

Will sighs softly. "Yes."

Doctor Lecter smiles again. It is probably polite. It appears to be polite. Something about the close-lipped nature of it makes Will think of dogs again, lips pulling tight before a snarl. He puts it out of his mind. Too many impressions swirling there today.

"I appreciate your kind company, Doctor Lecter," he says, when the silence becomes- to Will at least- laborious.

"It was truly my pleasure."

"Mine as well." It's true, he thinks.

"I encourage you to return at any time and ask for me at the desk," Doctor Lecter replies. "I occasionally give public lectures here in the evenings, as well."

"Interesting," Will murmurs. "I'll be sure to attend. Thank you, Doctor."

"Good evening, Mister Graham." Doctor Lecter gives him a very proper bow. Will returns it with a shiver. He takes a moment to put his coat back on and when he looks back up, Doctor Lecter is already gone.

Curious, Will lingers a while longer amongst the dead things, hoping for another glimpse. When he emerges into the air, evening is sinking down over London, making shadows long in the orange night. He pulls his coat tighter, steps quickening. The streets are far from deserted, but they're quiet. There are couples arm in arm, carriages passing by. It still seems too much of a crowd.

Will shies away, walking in the direction of home through the markets, drawing to a close. The scents of cooking entice him, an entirely foreign sensation. There are youngsters sweeping up after their masters in the square. He eventually relents and stops to buy a meat pie from a cart, offering a polite smile to the young girl who wraps it in paper and hands it to him. When he turns back to the street, one of the sweeping children is standing stock still, her pale eyes boring into Will's face. She licks her lips.

Will stares back for a moment, feeling pinned. He takes in the child's dirty face and shredded hems; looks at the pastry in his hand. "Are you hungry, little one?"

No answer, just staring. Will wonders if she doesn't speak English, but doubts his Creole French will do much good. He takes a step closer, holding out the paper bundle.

"You can have it, it's all right."

Instead of answering, or grabbing the food, the girl turns tail and runs, with a strange halting stumble. Will watches her go, and then sighs and looks at the bundle in his hand.

"Guess it's not that good." It still smells good though. He shakes his head and keeps walking, a little more quickly now. Home. He wants to be back inside the fortress of Jack's townhouse. For all his anger, it's the one thing Jack has given him that he's truly grateful for.

He'd taken Will on as somewhat of a ward after their shared time together hunting killers in New Orleans. He'd followed Jack to help him continue that work here, and he'd tried, but it had only been a matter of time before he'd met Margot and been consumed by darkness. Jack has been kind enough not to turn him out. But Will is still glad he's gone away for a while. Lonesomeness has always been more fitting for him. Less distracting, at any rate. And fewer injuries.

He rolls his shoulders, feeling an itch between his shoulder blades. He knows there are still bodies on the streets and this is only a temporary reprieve.

He falls gratefully into the door some time later, dragging himself up the stairs back to his room. He's still holding the wrapped pie, and so he eats it sat on the windowsill when he's undressed for bed, looking out onto the street. The London night is falling like ink soaking the fabric of the sky, bleeding deep plum down to the skyline. His eyes find a lone figure down on the pavement, thrown into stark shadow by the street lamps, and he shivers though he's not sure why. Something familiar in the shape- the nightshine of eyes like a dog's in the gloom. A stray, maybe. He needs to stop spooking at shadows.

He closes the shutters for the night and locks them, washing up for bed. As he sinks down against the sheets, he looks at the cross on the wall and considers praying. Instead his mind meanders again to the Doctor in the museum, moving amongst skeletons. Asking Will why he's drawn to dead things, like he *knows*. It's a ridiculous fancy, of course, but Will has little else to do inside his head. He imagines the Doctor poring over the tiny, bleached bones of bats and rodents, peering at the space inside and seeing Will. It's comforting enough that he starts to drift to sleep.

*

Hannibal hears the knock at the kitchen door, the drag of footsteps through his hall, but he does not bother to rise from his seat at his harpsichord. The tune is light and easy. He hears the footsteps pause in the door. He waits. Whoever is here will wait until the music stops.

He plays through the final bars, eyes down. Then he looks up, and oh...it's one of his children. They're always such a chore to communicate with when they haven't fed recently. "What is it, Abigail?" he says, politely.

"Master," the girl says around a thick tongue. Hannibal nods, gesturing for her to continue. "The man...he spoke to me."

"What did he say?"

"Offered food." Her filmy eyes roll a bit.

Hannibal turns to look at her. "What else? Where did he go?"

When she only shuffles her feet, Hannibal sighs and reaches directly into her mind for it. He sees Will Graham at the window of a townhouse, sat on the sill in his casuals. A streetlight paints him in streaks of golden light. Hannibal closes his eyes and remembers the scent of him. "I need more. Return. Keep an eye on him."

"Yes, Master," Abigail says, shuffling back out.

Hannibal watches her go; listens to the distant sounds of slithering, hissing breaths. "Chiyoh," he says, to the depths of the house, "feed Abigail." He feels her acknowledgement.

He goes back to the keys, thinking it over as he starts to play once more. He knows where Will lives now, which is helpful, though he's slightly irritated that Abigail drew attention to herself. But- Will has a gift for this, he reminds himself. He must feel the eyes of the damned on him daily.

Losing himself in the sound and the memory of Will's cool eyes for a while longer, Hannibal continues uninterrupted before another shadow arrives at the door. "Chiyoh."

"Hannibal." He turns to see the end of her impeccable bow.

"I may need a more capable eye on our friend."

"Doctor Bloom has asked him to meet with her three times each week," she says. "I will deal with the current secretary and monitor their sessions as we have planned."

"Very good. Thank you, Chiyoh." The Verger girl, thanks to her social schedule, had been much easier to track than Will Graham. And gaudy enough to court the tabloids. He hates to tie his most competent servant down in such a way, but having his creatures eavesdropping on her sessions with the alienist has finally borne beautiful fruit. Miss Verger has fulfilled the role well. It seems fitting that the sibling of the fallen might assist in such a way. Her importance wanes now. In her place blooms potential of another kind.

But Will visiting the museum...a stroke of pure fortune, that. He wonders if Will was being truthful when he expressed interest in Hannibal's lectures, or if he'll be forced to engineer another meeting. He'd felt the suspicion in him like a cool breeze. It's thrilling to behold his indifference: perhaps he's aware of the power he holds, subconsciously. Hannibal appreciates him for so many reasons, not least being the challenge he presents.

He smiles to himself at the thought. Around him, things scuttle in the shadows. He ignores them.

*

Two days later, Will is seated in front of Doctor Bloom's desk again. He hadn't been sure he'd actually return, but he isn't ready for another of Margot's social calls, and he's seen urchins ducking around the corners of the house so he assumes she's monitoring him as she'd threatened. The secretary, a young woman this time, had announced him in a bored tone; but Doctor Bloom, for her part, is watching him with the same well-concealed curiosity as before.

"Are you well, Mister Graham?"

"Tolerable, Doctor."

"That's better than last time, at least." She gets up, going to the cupboard behind her desk, using her cane as an aid. When she returns, she's holding a few wax cylinders in metal casing. "Since you have returned for our scheduled meeting, I must inform you that I record all of my sessions for later study. The recordings do not leave my private office. Do I have your permission to do so?"

Will looks uneasily at the cylinders. He has brief, uneasy thoughts of souls trapped in photographs. "I've never heard my own voice," he murmurs.

"Not many people have. It's not pleasant. You don't have to worry about that, though - like I said, my ears only."

He pauses, then nods. "Very well."

She smiles. "All right. Let's begin."

"Where?" Will murmurs.

"Wherever you like."

Will grimaces and plucks his glasses from his face, tucking them in a pocket. "I should not like to begin anywhere. But I know where I ought to."

"And where's that?"

"The stable boy," Will murmurs.

The doctor nods. "What happened?"

"I lied," Will tells her. "I was the stable boy."

She tilts her head, though her expression remains placid. "Why the lie?"

"I live in a fine house now, I have plenty of money, but I'm merely pretending. This office, you, your clients...my talents make me a curiosity, but it's easier to form a connection when people see me as one of their own."

"I'm sure it is. What happened, when you were a stable boy?"

"I slept with the son and heir of the estate we served, like I said," Will shrugs. He fidgets, then. "He was engaged. I knew I shouldn't have, I knew it was the worst thing I could have done. I simply knew he wanted me, and I wanted his want. And we got caught."

"You wanted his want? Explain that to me."

Will hesitates, thinking. "I... hadn't ever felt that from someone before. Or reciprocated it, at least."

"So you did reciprocate, not merely mirror it."

"Difficult to tell," he mutters.

"We'll come back to that. What happened next?"

"I was told I would never see him again, and I didn't. His father dragged me home and told my pa what he'd found. He was... beside himself." Will curls his nails against the arm rest of his chair, shifting uneasily.

"What did they do?" Will looks uneasily at the recording cylinder again. "Mister Graham, I am merely trying to understand," she says, voice taking on a brisker authority.

"I know that." Will swallows a bit, and steels himself. "My father refused to take me back, but he could not accept that my employer wished to prosecute," he says stiffly. Doctor Bloom nods for him to continue, face carefully blank. "Someone he knew found a place at the sanitarium. When I was finally released..." he takes a deep breath. "My father had died, and I had nothing."

"And then what happened?"

Will shrugs gracelessly. "It was New Orleans. Plenty of work on the streets. Mostly I read cards. Easy if you have the sight."

"It could not have been lucrative."

"It wasn't lucrative. I rented a room in a boarding house, and I got by. Then Jack Crawford found me."

"Who is he?"

"My sponsor. He's a singular person, some say a dilettante but he's worked for the Pinkertons for many years."

"A detective agency. What does he detect?"

"Murder."

"And your specialty makes that easier."

"That's one way to put it," he grumbles.

"What's another?"

"It makes it so it's all I can see."

"Explain that to me."

"When I read someone's mind...they stay with me."

"Do they... push you out?"

He nods, and she nods back and makes a note. Will sighs. "Doctor Bloom..."

"What is it?"

"I don't like not knowing what you're thinking."

"I'm thinking that you must spend a lot of time feeling afraid."

Will breathes out. "Yes."

"What do you fear the most?"

Will laughs bitterly. "I'm over-saturated. I couldn't pick just one thing."

"I'd like to work on making it clear," she says. The thought makes Will sigh but he nods. Doctor Bloom studies his face for another moment, then closes her folio. "We'll finish here today. Another assignment for you, Mister Graham. The same as the first, I'm afraid."

"You're testing my limits, Doctor Bloom."

"Should I not be? It's the responsible way to proceed."

Will smiles. "A poor attempt at humour, I'm afraid."

She smiles like she knows. "We'll get there. I'll see you in two days, Mister Graham."

Will nods. "Of course. Thank you."

Outside the building, he takes several deep breaths of cool afternoon air. Now what? He has no idea. He thinks of gleaming iridescent wings and glass eyes and finds himself treading the familiar route back to the museum. The thought of meeting Doctor Lecter again also crosses his mind. He remembers the invitation to his lectures and checks his pocket watch. He'll make it if he's swift.

He's quick anyway, no desire to remain in the streets longer than necessary. The museum looms, bright and imposing in the cool sun. Will heads inside and is grateful for the gloom of the entrance hall. He hears a smooth accented voice speaking somewhere nearby.

Just off the main hall, there's a small cluster of chairs around a black board and a few specimen cases on a table amongst the other exhibits. Will sees Doctor Lecter there, speaking on evolution of all things. The gathered patrons seem rather evenly split between fascination and dismay.

Will sits down and sees the moment the Doctor spots him. Imperceptibly, something changes in his stance. He's no longer addressing the group, but Will alone. He's a dark shape amongst the glass cases, slender and neat. Will meets his eyes and does not conceal his smile. He even answers a few of the questions Doctor Lecter pretends to posit to the audience. They're discussing insects now, broadly. The case on display is the same one they had stood before just days ago.

"Little nightmares," Doctor Lecter says, in an almost private tone. Will feels it caress his skin.

He waits until the lecture finishes; until the guests filter out amongst the cases. He goes to Doctor Lecter, resisting the urge to fidget.

"Very insightful of you," he murmurs.

"Thank you, Mister Graham, I'm glad you found it provoking."

"Oh, I think a few other listeners found it *quite* provoking."

"I'm sure they did." He sounds cavalier.

"Do you like to provoke them, Doctor?"

He smiles, close-lipped but wolfish. "Perhaps."

"Don't your lectures fund the museum? Seems unwise to ruffle feathers."

The doctor shrugs elegantly. "Charles Darwin was a Christian. No need for science and religion to butt heads."

Will snorts softly. "And yet, they continue to do so."

"Sooner or later, it seems, everyone picks a side."

"Are we speaking more broadly than little nightmares now, Doctor?"

Doctor Lecter shrugs elegantly. "We could very well be speaking of the great, towering variety."

"Sounds as if you're familiar with those."

"I make a point to be."

They just look at one another for a moment. Will at least is trying to read his face. He can't decide what it is that he's seeing, but there's something open in Doctor Lecter's opaqueness -

not simple friendliness. Will doesn't think he's misreading that at least. He is interested. Somehow.

"It's something I'm trying to unfamiliarise myself with."

Doctor Lecter smiles softly. "Monsters don't always have to terrorise. They can protect, too."

"They protect their own, I would imagine," Will murmurs.

"I'm sure that's true."

"We do as well, do we not?"

"I'd argue we are one of the few species that do not."

Will tilts his head. "No?"

"Is that your experience?" Doctor Lecter counters.

Will takes a moment to think about it. "Not...when it really meant something, no," he murmurs.

Doctor Lecter shrugs. "Part of the reason we prefer the company of taxidermy, I suppose."

"I suppose." He waits for the doctor to indicate that he is ready to move on. He takes the cue.

"How can I help you this evening, Mister Graham?"

"Just whiling away some time."

"In that endeavour, I'm sure I can assist. Let me show you some of our new creatures."

"Really-? Is that allowed?"

"I won't tell if you won't," the Doctor says, tone conspiratorial.

Will looks at his boots, stifling a boyish grin. "Thank you." The doctor steers him toward the steps off the exhibit hall with a light hand on his shoulder. Will smiles up at him. "I'm not sure what I did to earn a private tour."

"You need a distraction. I am avoiding my taxidermist asking for my critique on his latest monstrosity."

"Perhaps you need a better taxidermist."

"Sadly, our usual is temporarily indisposed to private matters." Will shrugs awkwardly. "Better not to talk about it anymore, I'd have to show you some, and I'm afraid they often fall into the category of nightmarish we discussed before." The doctor leads him into another room, just as tall but clearly off limits, the walls lined with tall cabinets filled with labelled drawers. Will is distracted by the slim line of his back and neat suit, Prussian blue and bordering on ostentatious in the environment. He hadn't realized in the dimmer light of the

museum proper that the fabric of his necktie is subtly embroidered with insects. He stares until he realizes the Doctor has noticed.

"Are you quite well?"

"God- yes, I'm sorry. Details are my downfall, I can get transfixed if left unsupervised."

"I shall be sure to wear a less distracting tie next time."

"Please, don't on my account." In an attempt at escape, Will wanders to read the labels. Mostly alphabetised; partially shorted Latin names. Doctor Lecter opens up one of the drawers and the inside is filled to the brim with preserved birds in every colour Will could imagine. "Oh," he gasps, hand reaching automatically.

The doctor doesn't stop him this time- instead he lifts one of the plain wooden boxes and lets Will stroke the plumage of a bright-throated songbird, swathed in cloth like a funeral shroud.

"Oh," Will says again, softly. He can imagine the soft crepe skin of the eyelid rolling back; the beady bright eye beneath.

"Beautiful, aren't they?"

"So beautiful." He strokes again with his knuckle. The songbird emits a soft, high note, echoing amongst the shelves. He swallows against the daydream and refocuses fiercely. "Where are they from?"

"Melanesia, mostly. They've found their way to our gray shores in this manner."

"It's a little sad, isn't it?" Will murmurs.

"It is," Doctor Lecter agrees, "for those of us who might wish to enjoy their song instead."

Will sighs at the thought. "At least we can imagine."

Doctor Lecter nods, replacing the tray and taking Will's elbow to guide him to another cabinet. Will peers interestedly over the tops of his spectacles. Bats, this time.

"*Desmodus Rotundus*, a most interesting genus," Doctor Lecter says, lifting the tray for Will's inspection, "Specialized nectar feeders that evolved to a different kind of liquid diet, they're one of the only creatures on earth that survive through hematophagy. I'm quite fond of them myself; their little upturned snouts and vicious little teeth- they're quite misunderstood." He tilts the specimen this way and that, so the light catches through its wings, showing veins like miniscule cracks in glass. "They're more at home in the dark than the light."

Will is still transfixed by the soft fur and delicate bones. After a minute, he fully processes the last line, and sighs. "I don't blame them."

"Why is that, Mister Graham?" Doctor Lecter smiles.

"It's easier that way, isn't it? See no evil, hear no evil."

"That is not dark, it is merely hiding."

"The dark is the best place for it." Their eyes meet and Will suddenly fights a blush.

"Nothing wrong with hiding. For some it's essential."

"Sounds like you know plenty about it, Doctor Lecter."

His answering smile goes a bit sharp at that and Will's eyes are drawn to the exposed tip of a canine. It makes him look quite fierce, for a moment. *Vicious little teeth.*

Will doesn't know why that appeals to him so much. The doctor is quite soft-spoken, after all.

"I must confess, I had hoped I'd see you again, Mister Graham," he says, abruptly but quietly, interrupting Will's woolgathering.

"I am delighted to be seen, then," Will smiles and the Doctor returns it, softer now. "Tell me, Doctor," Will continues, "do you ever leave the museum?"

"They have not yet assigned me my own specimen cabinet."

"You sound disappointed."

"It would save me carriage fare." He looks like he finds his little joke amusing. Will is unexpectedly charmed by the little display of humility.

"You could always come in here, I suppose."

"Roll myself into a deep drawer, yes, very good, Mister Graham." Doctor Lecter pauses.

"Were you implying you'd like to meet outside the museum?"

Will hesitates. He's abruptly unsure how he could be so cavalier about this. "I - only if you'd like."

The Doctor regards him for a long second, and then he touches Will's wrist with his fingers, the bare touch of their skin unmistakably electric. "I would. Very much."

Will's heart thumps. Despite everything, it's still in him, the desire for things he shouldn't have. Those talons in him, pricking his heart and lungs from the inside. He swallows the fierce urge to run; thinks of prayers unanswered. If God made him a broken thing, he will have to bear the consequences on Will's soul personally. He won't be self-flagellating for things beyond his control anymore.

"When?"

"Tomorrow?"

Will ducks his head in a short nod. "Where would you like to go?"

"Do you enjoy music?" Doctor Lecter asks him.

"I have on occasion."

"We could attend a concert of some sort. I know of several venues nearby."

Will nods quickly. "Very good."

"Perhaps we could meet at the Regent's Coffeehouse. Do you know it?"

"I do. What time works for you-?"

"Half-past seven?"

Will nods. "That - that sounds nice."

A nod of the doctor's elegant head. "I look forward to it."

"As do I."

They look a moment longer at the petrified creatures in the drawer, and then Will allows himself be ushered back to the main lobby of the museum. As ever, the doctor seems liable to be called upon at any minute. He touches Will's shoulder as he walks him back to the lecture hall.

"I regret I must stop hiding from the taxidermist now, but it was most rewarding to hide with you."

"Thank you for the private tour," Will whispers, enjoying the slight squeeze of his fingers.

"You're most welcome. I'll see you tomorrow, Mister Graham."

Nodding, Will slips away before he can say anything else. Back on the street, he dodges a newsboy reciting the headlines of the evening edition – "*Murder on the Docklands! A woman found mauled!*" – and reflects briefly on the events of the afternoon instead. He finds himself hesitantly smiling, feeling fortunate to have met Doctor Lecter at this strange time in his life. It's the one pleasant thing he can distract himself with, amidst everything else. Even if he's agreed to go to a concert tomorrow: that alone would be deterrent enough any other day. He resolves simply to go home and stay in until the last possible moment. Possibly fretting all the while. Probably fretting. He rolls his eyes at himself and carries on home.

*

The next night, he arrives promptly to meet Doctor Lecter, collar pulled up against the chill that is settling in over the city, the stars already out in force, visible even through the fug of industry. The doctor is waiting at the agreed spot, resplendently all in velvet black but for the crisp white peak of his shirt collar.

"Doctor Lecter," Will nods at him, and he smiles in return.

"Perhaps you ought to call me Hannibal."

"Ought I? On what grounds?" He allows himself a small smile.

"On the grounds that this is our third meeting, and I'd like it if you would."

"Very well." Will nods. "You must in turn call me Will, then."

Doctor Lecter- Hannibal, Will reminds himself- smiles. "Will. I would be delighted."

Will watches him for a moment, and despite his stillness, it seems he really would. "What have you decided on then, Hannibal?"

"A cellist is performing at the musical arts society tonight," he replies. "I'd be pleased to take you to listen to the recital."

"I'm sure I will be as well."

Hannibal offers his arm and Will looks around fleetingly, his ears heating. This is normal, he tells himself sternly. Men do things together, nothing suspect about it.

"Don't be nervous. We'll be amongst friends at the concert hall." Hannibal sounds very certain. Will eyes him skeptically. Hannibal raises his eyebrows and waits, patient.

Finally, Will lays a hand on his forearm and squeezes. "Lead on."

They walk through the cool, still night, quiet at first. The noises of coffee houses - and houses of other sorts - are muffled as if by cotton wool. The street lights are being lit as they walk by, welcoming the night. Will smiles a bit. It feels like a warm coat around his shoulders.

"How was your day, Doctor?"

"Quite as usual, Will." Hannibal smiles. "Better now."

"It's early yet," Will murmurs.

Hannibal laughs softly. "Such a high opinion of yourself."

"Is that what it is?" Will replies.

Hannibal steers them into the little theatre, silence thoughtful. It's a small foyer, crowded with people. Will looks around, wondering what Hannibal intended to suggest by saying they'd be among friends. It seems a fairly normal theatre. They're waved into the auditorium, and Will peers around, intrigued. He feels Hannibal, still by his side.

"It's nice here," he murmurs, uncomfortable.

"I'm delighted you appreciate it."

"It's beautiful." Will looks up at the decorated ceiling, gleaming with gold and red. He allows his gaze to wander until the musician takes the stage.

The music is mournful, and beautiful, and Will can't help but be lulled into it. The musician plays with a shocking amount of passion. It's all Will can do to listen and not simply stare at his tormented face. He tries hard not to imagine what kind of pain propels his art and feels the first tears gather in his eyes. He turns his face into the dark, swallowing it down.

A warm hand settles on his arm. Hannibal doesn't speak, but Will can feel him watching. It's grounding, his hand on him. He tries to remember to breathe. When he looks, Hannibal is still watching the cellist. Will can imagine his voice in his head, soothing. He closes his eyes and settles again.

By the end of the performance, he's forgotten everything except the cellist and Hannibal. His hand is still firm on Will's arm, but he looks faraway until Will shifts. Then he smiles and says Will's name. "Did you enjoy it?"

Will nods. "Very much."

"I'm so pleased." Hannibal rises from his seat smoothly, holding his arm out to Will.

This time it's a relief to take it. He feels a little shaken, saturated in the atmosphere of the place and paranoid with it. A quick glance around shows him many other pale, shaken faces.

For a fleeting second, he thinks he sees the gaunt, pale girl from the market, her dark hair a sleek curtain round her childish face. Ridiculous. He's imagining terror where it has no place. He looks back to Hannibal as they walk out of the auditorium.

"Did you enjoy it, Hannibal?"

"I found it stirring, yes." He looks - pleased. Will can't quite tell why.

"It was," he agrees, almost absently, "really quite haunting."

"Something you're familiar with, Will?" Hannibal asks mildly.

"Aren't we all?"

"Those whose minds are open to the world around them, of course."

"There's such a thing as excess in that, I'd wager."

"Open-mindedness? I certainly hope not."

Will cannot quite stifle his smile at the tone. "Spoken like a true scientist."

That gets him a warm once over in return. "Yes, I suppose." He pauses, and so does Will. "Would you care for coffee?"

Will barely hesitates. "Yes, thank you." Walking with Hannibal has made him feel warm again. He's trying to do what Doctor Bloom said- to push himself beyond isolation. He supposes he's lucky Hannibal feels like a barrier to *too much* interaction. It's like occupying a small, quiet room in the middle of the streets.

Will muses at the quiet fascination he feels for the Doctor, neat and homely in so many ways, fiercely exotic in others. It's a relief to feel something *normal*. Even if wanting to be out late at a coffeehouse is not normal for him. It is for other people. Perhaps... just perhaps he could have that.

Hannibal opens the door to a coffee shop for him primly. Aware of the freedom he hasn't exercised in a very long time, he smiles deeply and goes in, holding the door for Hannibal in return.

Chapter 2

It's blustery and crisp the next morning, the sky overhead threatening something cooler than mere rain, but Will steps out onto the street to walk to Doctor Bloom's office with a bit of spring in his step. He feels quite unlike himself- less guarded, less haunted. Spending time with Hannibal last night had been like reaching a lighthouse port after a long struggle against a storm.

He feels replete for having seen him smile; having listened to his gentle, musical voice until it was late enough that the streets were deserted on their way home. They'd tripped from streetlight to streetlight as if on a wave of gold. They had seen mist curling on the river like a soft veil, and Hannibal had laced their fingers like a secret thing amongst the fog and whispered, "Goodnight, my dear Will," before he'd taken his leave.

Even now, dodging pedestrians in the weak sunlight of a new day, he feels a deep ache that their flesh is parted. Head down, he lets himself into the building of Doctor Bloom's practice and goes through to the waiting room.

The new secretary is waiting, sharp black eyes immediately fixed on Will.

"Good morning," Will offers, "I've an appointment at ten."

"I remember you, Mister Graham," she replies shortly, exotic accent just soft enough to take her voice from rude to merely emphatic.

"Of course. Thank you." He takes his usual seat to wait, working his gloves off slowly. The secretary thoroughly ignores his presence as she works. That suits Will just fine. He's happy to let the silence sit until the door opens and Doctor Bloom appears.

"Mister Graham. Come on in."

"Good morning, Doctor Bloom." He seats himself and lets her arrange things on her desk.

"Good morning, Will."

"How are you today?"

"I'm fine, thank you for asking. And yourself?"

"I'm uh- I'm well, thanks." He smiles.

She tilts her head, pleased. "I'm glad to hear that. May I ask what you've been doing differently?"

Will considers. "I've met someone."

"A new friend?"

"Is that usually what people mean when they say they've met someone?"

"Other people, yes. For you, I felt clarification might be in order."

"Ah." Will looks away, mood taking a nosedive. "Yes, I suppose people like me don't often make friends."

"Will," she says, her tone gently scolding, "you don't let yourself."

"I've told you before, I shouldn't inflict myself on people."

"Miss Verger is your friend."

"Miss Verger needs me," Will corrects, "and what I know about her."

"Perhaps," murmurs Doctor Bloom. "Do you think it's time to tell me what happened between the two of you?"

Will sets his jaw and looks fleetingly at the recording cylinder, already turning over. He lets out a slow breath. "Miss Verger came to me with concerns for her brother's... spiritual health. She's a historian, she specializes in the occult-" she nods, "well, she had reason to believe her brother was dabbling in things he did not understand. Seances, sacrificial rituals." He pauses. "I find it hard to believe she hasn't already told you all of this."

"I want to hear what you found pertinent."

"What's pertinent is that her brother was a monster, if I may speak ill of the dead."

Doctor Bloom nods. "In here you may speak however you wish."

"Very well, then. Miss Verger came to Jack Crawford and I because she wished to have her brother followed and observed. His behavior, though perhaps, as she said, never wholly correct, had become wildly inappropriate since the death of their father."

Doctor Bloom nods. Will drums his fingers.

"We found evidence of Mister Verger having courted dark forces. He was mad, always mad, but in this instance it seemed he was no longer operating on what I would consider even a human level of unpleasantness. A number of children went... missing. We found them... altered. Normally it would have been quite enough to take it to the police and we had every intention of doing so but-" Will steels himself, teeth cutting the edges of the words out jaggedly. "I saw him one night in a vision that still haunts me."

"Tell me what you saw," the doctor murmurs.

Will bites his lip. "Context, first. Miss Verger had privately confessed another matter to me regarding her inheritance and threats her brother had made with regards to it. She made me a proposition, and I agreed."

The doctor listens attentively, head tilted slightly. Will wonders if Margot has mentioned this. She can't not have.

"In order not to be disinherited, she needed a male heir to continue the Verger name. I agreed to uh- attempt to give her one. She fell pregnant and Mason- I can't describe it, but somehow he knew. She came to tell me and that night I saw Mason... take it." The memory makes him grit his teeth; a wave of nausea. "Take it by unholy means. There was nothing I could do, I had never seen anything like it, it seemed a strange dream. I went to her, took the carriage in the night, but by the time I got to her my vision had come to pass...."

He scrubs his palms over his face, still feeling just bereft after these months. The Doctor's face twists in understanding, and Will believes it.

"Margot and I had agreed that given our mutual... preferences... a child and a marriage would have helped both of us. Mason made it so that it would help neither of us, but most of all his sister. But it was more than that. In my vision, he seemed... changed. Crepuscular and misshapen, a creature more than a man. I'm only fortunate that when I told her, she believed me." He rubs his eyes again. "I think she saw it too."

"What did you do after that?" Doctor Bloom murmurs.

"I confronted him, but he was truly lost by then. A frothing, roiling thing lived inside him. It spoke to me and said it had been waiting for me. That it had searched for me for many years." He shivers at the memory. "That was when I knew I would need help. Help can always be found in strange, dangerous corners. It was true in New Orleans and it is true in London. And Margot was sick, weak - she supported me, but I needed to take the lead. Jack came to my aid, like I knew he would. And a colleague of his who I considered a friend."

"You killed him."

"We tried to exorcise him first. It was a most resounding failure." He pauses and then sighs. "And he asked me again to join him- his Master. He said that his Master had spoken of me, and that one day we would walk in endless night with me by his side. He said it was what I was born for." His lip curls.

Doctor Bloom's voice is still steady, but she is pale. "His Master?"

"The Morningstar," Will murmurs. "The Unclean."

He watches her close her eyes. "The Devil."

Will nods. He waits for her to write something down; to barely conceal her disbelief. "If you don't believe me, Doctor..."

"Why wouldn't I believe you? I have two people telling me the exact same story."

"You do, don't you. Not suspecting *folie a deux*?"

"Whatever the reason for Mister Verger's madness, the fact remains he was a devious, vile murderer and you made a choice. Who am I to decide what you saw? Both of you."

Will nods. Fair enough.

Doctor Bloom continues. "May I ask a question?"

"Please do."

"What else did you stand to gain from marrying Margot? Before her brother attacked her?"

Will takes a deep breath, considering the motivations behind the question. He's suddenly all too aware of this particularly Margot-centric line of questioning. When he listens closely, he thinks he can hear the faint, shrill sound of envy. Of course. Well, she has no need to be envious of him.

When he finally summons an answer, his smile is thin. "Just a child, Doctor Bloom." He takes a breath. "Normality. A chance to be to a child what my father wasn't to me. And was."

She studies him silently for a moment; the pitch of her mental current transforms into sympathy- much worse.

"It doesn't matter now. I'm not sure a child deserves to have such a cursed father." He closes his eyes again.

"You're not cursed," Doctor Bloom says softly.

"You sound confident of that, Doctor Bloom."

"I am. I don't think a man with gifts like yours could be considered cursed. Thank you for telling me about Margot." She shuffles a bit, and Will thinks her eyes look brighter for a moment, moved. She clears her throat and tucks back a stray strand of hair. "Now. Tell me about this new friend of yours."

"He works at the Natural History Museum," Will murmurs. "Brilliant scientist."

"Ah, so that's where you met. What's he like?"

"Cultured. Fond of conversation. Not much like me."

"Do you always compliment someone by insulting yourself?"

Will pauses. "No, but it was just an observation."

"You're not cultured? You strike me as well-read, educated." Her tone doesn't brook argument.

He shrugs. "My dad did his best, we were poor but his employer gave him pretty free rein."

"Access to his son's books?" she guesses, cuttingly correct.

Will bows his chin. "We grew up together."

"I imagine you far outpaced him."

Will's face heats a bit at that. "I had to. I didn't have as much time as him."

She lets the statement hang for a moment. Will feels suddenly cleaved open; the way he imagines the people he reads do.

"Time," she repeats softly.

Will looks down at his hands. "I still don't feel I have it."

"What makes you think that?"

"The feeling of eyes on me," Will says quietly, "at every corner." Her expression is unreadable now. Will shakes his head. "I don't feel it as much when I'm... not alone."

"Then it's good you've made a friend, perhaps."

Again, Will only manages a solemn nod in reply. Abruptly, he wishes he were back at the museum, amongst the animals; frozen in a mimicry of life, Hannibal amongst them like a guardian. Hannibal would surely not mind another visit? The lingering worry that he's not wanted makes it hard to indulge himself. But he trusts Hannibal completely; trusts him to tell Will when he's no longer of interest to him.

If Doctor Bloom has noticed she's lost his attention, she doesn't say. She waits until he looks back up at her.

"Friendship is often confusing for me," Will mutters, "like I said before, I hold onto other people's feelings... the Doctor - he keeps them to himself. It makes it easier."

"I see," Doctor Bloom murmurs.

Will looks at his pocket watch and twitches a bit.

"Another appointment?" the doctor says mildly.

"No. This one just seems to be dragging."

He only realizes how rude it sounds when he's already said it. Despite his tone, Doctor Bloom smiles. "Go. We'll talk again when you feel like it. I'm here for your benefit, you're not a prisoner."

Will blushes. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. It's nice to see you smile about something."

Will glances at the wax cylinder and blushes again. "I should go."

Doctor Bloom takes the needle off the cylinder and nods. "I'll see you in two days, Will."

Will nods and collects his coat. On his way out, the dark-eyed secretary looks him over. He shivers as her gaze lingers on the back of his neck as he leaves.

Back on the street, his way is stopped by a large crowd gathered around a newsboy.

"Murder in Whitechapel! A woman found eaten alive!"

He stalls like many others around him, brow creasing at the words.

"Third such stunning crime in less than a month," the boy continues. "Who could be responsible for such a heinous deed? The Ripper, back from oblivion?"

Will shudders. A pricking at the back of his neck like the tips of fingernails makes him look around, but he sees nothing. Suddenly, the thought of seeing the Doctor is less appealing. Will is overtaken by somber thoughts of death and defilement. After buying a paper from the boy, he diverts unsteadily home, the feeling of being watched never entirely waning.

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To Hannibal's frustration, it is more than a week before Chiyoh returns to him with more information. In that time, Will has neither returned to the museum nor, according to Abigail and his other children, ventured anywhere other than Doctor Bloom's office. When Chiyoh does appear late one evening, it's with a box of heavy wax recording cylinders that she hooks up to a gramophone with calm hands.

"She is recording their sessions?" Hannibal asks, just to confirm. "How enterprising of you to bring them."

"I believed they would be of use to you. I will of course need to return them at some point."

"Of course, and I imagine they will be. Thank you." It's a clear dismissal, and she goes with a nod and a little bow.

Hannibal starts the machine, picking up a delicate glass goblet and sipping its contents meditatively before turning his attention to the recordings.

The sound quality is better than expected. Hannibal really is quite in awe of the new things the twilight of this century is bringing. Then again, he's seen a great number of centuries. He closes his eyes and savours the crackling hum of Will Graham's voice. The doctor's is velvety, practiced, easy to ignore; it doesn't matter what she says, anyway, just what she coaxes out of Will. Right now, she's asking him why he feels uncomfortable being recorded.

His lovely Will. Hannibal's children have been keeping an eye on his comings and goings for many months now, but Hannibal himself can only watch through their eyes from afar. He longs to send some sort of missive; has indeed composed several while alone in his study in the evenings. Each one, tossed unceremoniously into the fire - he cannot send them, as Will has not yet shared with Hannibal where he lives- his boy is mistrustful, shrewd and self-contained, sweet enough to drive him to distraction. The more letters he consigns to the flames, the more florid their contents become.

There have been drawings, too, lovingly rendered in graphite or charcoal. Will is an endlessly versatile subject, and Hannibal's imagination is just as endless. These he saves,

tucked away in a portfolio in the hope that they are the first of many. He pages softly through them sometimes, on the nights in which he chooses not to go out. The corners of a few are smudged with red- a spilled glass at the hands of his favorite child, Abigail, whilst he taught her to play piano.

"I lied," he hears Will say on the recording, the words slipping out like a little silver knife. Hannibal bares his teeth in an involuntary smile, then sighs in frustration. He's not sure how much longer he can wait.

*

"I've been having dreams."

Doctor Bloom tilts her head.

"What sorts of dreams?" He's been sitting in her office for twenty minutes alternately fidgeting and twisting his gloves in his hands, and he knew from the moment she asked him how he was that she would not believe a platitude about tiredness.

"It will make me sound insane," he tells her, but she just fixes him with a look and waits.

Worth a try. He rubs a hand over the back of his neck and adjusts his spectacles.

"Everywhere I go these past days and weeks, it's one of two things. Either some newspaper urchin on a street corner is shouting about gruesome murder. At night I dream of them peeking in the windows, whispering to me. I feel somehow like I'm being watched."

"Watched by whom?" she asks.

"There are street children everywhere," Will says, "Not that it is different, or surprising, but I just - cannot help but feel they are watching me. Me in particular. I've made eye contact with so many of them, and one would expect such a creature to beg for coin, perhaps, but they never do. They just scurry away like they're frightened."

"It upsets you, that they seem to be frightened of you. Is it because you were a street child yourself for a time?"

"I wasn't," Will protests, but he knows she is at least partially correct. "These children - they don't have anyone like Jack to take them in." Not that he would wish his talents or his particular history on any of them.

"You cannot save them all, Will." She looks sympathetic but implacable.

Is that what he wants? He's not sure. They *scare* him, in a way that he's somewhat ashamed to admit. But maybe she is correct. He's left feeling nearly as unsettled as he had before, but more sorrowful at the same time.

"They're not the child you could have had," she tells him gently. It sticks in him like a needle, startling him with the ferocity of his feelings. She's missing the point- it's not that he sees them, it's that they see *him*.

"Thank you, Doctor Bloom," he swallows hard, "but I think I should end my hour here, for today."

"As you wish, Will. Try to go and do something you enjoy." It's a familiar refrain, and as always, there is one location that springs immediately to mind.

At the Natural History Museum, he asks after Hannibal at the desk, spending a few moments distractedly biting his lip until he appears.

"Will." He looks surprised to see him, but not displeased.

"I'm sorry to just drop in like this, Hannibal."

"It's quite all right. I was just in my office looking over the schedule for our next exhibit-come with me, I dare say I can run to a cup of tea?"

"I'd love that," Will says gratefully.

Hannibal leads him up a few flights of stairs to the staff levels of the museum, a steadying hand drifting to his shoulder when the corridor is quiet. He lets Will into his office with a small smile. It's spacious and well lit by gas lamps, the walls lushly decorated with paintings and botanical studies. Despite the clutter, it still feels lavishly ordered, from the plush leather seats to the imposing red wood desk with its meticulously organized accessories. The space is so very Hannibal that Will can't help but feel at home.

"It's good to see you again," Hannibal says eventually, with a warmth in his face that sets Will flushing.

"Thanks for allowing me to take your time unannounced."

"If you recall, I did invite you to."

"I- yes." Will fidgets with his gloves a little. "I know."

"Is something wrong?"

"Had a bit of an upsetting conversation this morning, that's all. Visiting with you is - restful."

Hannibal levels him with his calm maroon gaze. "I'm glad to hear it." He seats Will in a chair and rings for tea. "Do you want to discuss it?"

Will shakes his head automatically.

"Very well." Hannibal gives him a gentle smile. "Is there anything in particular you would like to discuss? I can go on about my new exhibit for some time if necessary."

"That sounds good, actually."

"Very well." Hannibal hands him a packet of photographs to look through. "Here are some of the specimens we'll be receiving shortly."

He slips on his spectacles. It's calming just to let himself be absorbed in them for a moment- no murder here to reconstruct, no echoing screams. He flicks a look up at Hannibal. "Tell me about it?"

"It'll be an exhibition on nocturnal animals," Hannibal explains, "from jaguars to rodents and insects - and of course bats."

"Sounds fascinating," Will tells him, "with your flair for the dramatic it will most likely be aesthetically delightful as well as educational."

"Hopefully it will be. I've been enquiring about spotlights, so that visitors might creep about in the dark amongst the creatures. Raise a few hairs."

"How diabolical of you," Will teases gently.

"Speaking of lighting, one of the gentleman I contacted about theatrical lighting wasn't available to speak until today; I don't suppose you'd like to accompany me to the circus tonight?"

Will pauses, tilting his head. "Of course. It's kind of you to ask." He smiles slightly. "Not your usual venue, is it?"

"How did you guess?"

"I'm observant, Hannibal." He smiles. "Besides, I'm still not convinced they let you leave for such frivolity."

Hannibal's lips twitch. "Still convinced I have my own storage drawer?"

"I'd like to think it was something other than falling asleep at your desk."

Hannibal smiles over at him. "I do manage to shuffle home some nights."

Will makes a noise of acknowledgement. Possibly disbelief. Hannibal smiles.

"Maybe I'll show you."

Will raises an eyebrow.

"If you'd like," Hannibal adds.

Their eyes meet and Will can't help smiling. "I think I might."

"Shall I send a cab for you tonight?" Hannibal asks politely.

Will bites back the retort that he's capable of getting his own and nods instead, fidgeting. "If you like."

"The address?"

"Of course." He hands him one of Jack's business cards from his wallet.

Hannibal smiles. "Perfect."

The door goes, and Hannibal answers it to retrieve a tea tray, depositing it on his desk. While he fixes two cups, Will looks around at the vast array of animals mounted on the walls and on separate tables beneath, obviously put there temporarily but not necessarily since Hannibal's residence.

"I still prefer the living ones," Will says.

"As do I, but they're rather more difficult to house."

"True." He manages a small laugh as he accepts a cup. He watches Hannibal add milk to his own and gently whirl it before he takes a sip, teaspoon left untouched.

"Tell me how you came to be here, Will," Hannibal says eventually, voice soft. "In London."

Will nods at the card sitting on Hannibal's desk. "Jack. We met in New Orleans. I assist him with his investigations."

"So you're a detective?"

Will shrugs, uncomfortable with the title, or maybe the polite tone of his voice. "I'd say an investigator, I don't work for the police."

"Must be fascinating," Hannibal replies.

Will looks down at his cup, uncomfortable. "This... is why I don't tell people."

"What do you mean?"

"I become a curiosity."

"It's an interesting job. Inspires morbid minds, I imagine."

"Mine more than most. My thoughts aren't... tasty."

"Taste is subjective. Individual."

"Is it, though?"

"Of course." Hannibal stands up, paces around his desk and stands behind Will's chair. He sets a gentle hand on his shoulder and leans down. "Look at the moths on the wall, Will."

Grateful for the distraction, Will does. "I'm looking."

Hannibal squeezes his shoulder. "What do you see?"

"I see transformation. Reincarnation. They're born of darkness and decay, and spend their lives searching for the light."

"Like us, in a way."

"Yes." Will's gaze lingers on the little seed-shaped bodies; white tufts of fur and great, tortoiseshell wings. "I think they're quite beautiful, really."

"Most people do not agree. Most people see tiny, fluttering motes of darkness coming at them from nowhere, creeping amongst leaves and rot. Suffice it to say, I appreciate your viewpoint on the matter."

Will sighs. "They're made of dust and the remains of their past selves, wings like antique mirrors. How could I not like them?"

Hannibal's hand shifts to the back of his neck. "How, indeed."

Will closes his eyes. He can't help it.

"I like them, too. And I like you," Hannibal tells him.

Will opens his eyes again. A strange, trickling fear goes through him, under the little thrill of joy. "You won't when you get to know me. I'm not a nice man."

"I beg to differ." His breath is hot against Will's ear, but then he straightens and strolls back to his desk. Will feels unsteady without the hand on his neck. His teacup judders for a brief moment before he collects himself, letting his eyes roam over Hannibal's face. He refocuses; takes a small sip of his tea.

"What time tonight?"

"Eight o'clock, if that suits?"

"Yes, of course." He watches Hannibal sip his tea as well.

"Perhaps afterward, a drink?"

Will's lips quirk. "We'll see how it goes." If Hannibal is perplexed by that, he doesn't show it, just nods.

He changes the subject then, to something innocuous. Will feels unmoored again by it. He holds on to their plans for tonight like a thin thread.

"Hannibal," he interrupts his monologue about fire ants haltingly, "I like you, too. Very much."

Hannibal pauses, presses his lips together. Each fissure of his face seems writ deep with fascination; hopefulness. "I am delighted."

"Sorry," Will adds belatedly.

"No need, Will." He tilts his head. "You seem concerned by that notion."

Only because I attract darkness, Will thinks. "My liking people generally doesn't end well for them."

"I refuse to be superstitious, Will. I'm a scientist." Hannibal smiles coolly.

"My superstition is based on findings in the field," Will points out.

"We shall see."

"I guess we will." They both finish their tea in nearly comfortable silence. Will wants to ask more, but it feels dangerous; a teetering ledge where their friendship balances, swaying between intimacy and detachment. Eventually, Will sets down his cup.

"Well, thank you for your time, Doctor Lecter." He rises and refastens his coat.

"Freely given, with enjoyment," Hannibal replies. He stands with him, eyes warm.

"Likewise."

As Will pulls on his gloves, Hannibal's hand curves around his waist. He bends, close enough that Will feels his breath again; can count his eyelashes from his periphery. "Be safe, Will Graham."

Will takes a deep breath and pulls away, but not before Hannibal's fingers brush the soft leather of his gloves fleetingly. "Thank you, Doctor."

He lets himself out before Hannibal can escort him. Something makes him feel like he's fleeing a predator, unusually skittish. He's embarrassed by it, and Hannibal had seemed to sense it, but... he hadn't exactly tried to dispel it.

Will doesn't know exactly what that means. At the same time, he's not sure the trembling in his belly is all fear. He's fixated; moved by him- his stillness, and his even, unflappable manner. Will feels the way it wraps around him when they're together, and he craves it. He looks up at the sky, grey clouds settling in to promise a rainy afternoon, and sighs at the thought.

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When he gets home, the first thing he notices is a familiar hat and coat on the stand in the hallway. Bracing himself with a sigh, he heads to the drawing room: the door is open and Jack Crawford is waiting.

He walks in and sets his things aside on the side table. "Hello, Jack."

"Will." Jack bows his chin in a nod. "Good to see you. How have you been?"

"I've been better," Will says tightly.

"So have I. There's a murderer on the loose."

Will sighs. "They called you back to assist."

Jack nods gravely. "And I need your help."

"Of course."

Jack fixes him with a stare until Will shifts uncomfortably. "Do you have any theories yet?" Jack finally asks him.

"I have been actively avoiding theories." Jack nods, eyes far away. Will can feel the frustration rolling off of him. This soon into a case, it's not a good sign. "Jack. I haven't even seen a scene, just what's in the papers. What isn't in the papers?"

Jack sighs. "All the victims have been exsanguinated, like they've been hung off a butcher's rack- but there's no removal from the scene, just wounds... it's like he's siphoning them off."

Will furrows his brow at the word 'butcher'. "You think it's the Ripper?"

Jack flinches at the name. "It might be *a* Ripper. Not sure it's Jack the Ripper: no mutilation of the private parts, the victim profile doesn't fit."

"But there is mutilation?"

"On some, not all. The ones there are, they're like... theatre productions."

"Sounds like cult activity."

"No one claiming responsibility either," Jack replies.

"Well they wouldn't. I wouldn't. Would you?"

Jack snorts. "Not these ones. These have got people scared, Will. I need you to take a look."

Unwillingness rears in his chest but he throttles it fiercely: if he must have this wretched mind, he must at least use it for good. "Fine." he says. "If you'll excuse me."

"Why, where are you going?"

"I have an engagement this evening. I'll need to bathe and get ready."

Jack frowns at him. "People's lives are in danger."

"And if someone dies tonight, I'll carry another soul on my conscience," Will snaps.

"It's barely mid-afternoon. You could spare a couple of hours."

If Will asks to see files now, he will undoubtedly regret it, but Jack's expression is unrelenting. He takes a deep breath. "All right, give me the files. I need to see them alone."

Jack nods, appeased now that Will is cooperating. He stands with a thick sheaf of paper and hands it to Will, expression grave.

Will tries to suppress his shiver at its touch. Screams drip from the corners like something sticky. Will tries to touch as little as possible, like too much contact might stain. He goes upstairs and deposits the lot on his desk.

The photos spill out, grainy and blurred in some cases. He averts his eyes, going to his wardrobe to strip out of his coat, waistcoat, and tie. His eyes drift to the photos again, and then to the cross on the wall; Christ's face for now seeming sympathetic. With a sigh, Will picks up the photos and looks, until he *sees*.

Food, that's all they are. Consumed and then discarded. They're prey to be caught; wrestled down and silenced with teeth.

All that blood, all mine, screams a voice inside him. Another answers, deep and rich.

Take only what you have earned. The rest is mine.

All the horror rushes up from the photos through Will's white hands, up his arms to grip his brain and lungs. He feels *hunger*, irrepressible, inescapable. The papers drop to the floor and he follows, on his knees among them. His stomach feels cramped with it, the hunger, the sheer desperation. He closes his eyes and bites down hard on a fist to stifle a cry.

Rivers of blood rise around him like they had that night in the bath. He can't describe the scent. It chokes him until he sways, smothering his senses like a great wave crushing him. He looks to the cross and sees it running from behind the wood as if from Christ himself.

He's paralyzed, drowning, until finally he gathers enough function to shove the photos away in a whirl of white wings, panting. He crawls over to his bed and leans his head against the mattress. Nausea spins inside him like a whirlpool.

Eventually, a knock sounds at the door. He makes a vague noise to let Jack know he can come in.

"Well?" Jack doesn't comment on his huddle by the bed: he's seen worse.

"It's... they're not all the same person." Jack looks sour, but he doesn't question it. "Those-" Will points at the ones spewed over the floorboards. "It's like the killer is an animal. Wild need. Pure hunger. There's no artifice.

"And the others?"

Will bites his lip. He reaches out and fingers the very corner of a photo of a corpse; equally brutalised but somehow refined. "The blood. It's still a sacrifice, still taken for a reason- but it's not mindless."

"What is the reason?" Jack asks quietly.

Will sighs softly. "I don't know yet. A ritual, probably."

"What if you saw the bodies?"

Will sighs. "Maybe then." He knows he won't be able to cry off. "Tomorrow," he says, almost a plea.

"Tomorrow," Jack echoes, sounding resigned.

Will waits, and eventually the door slides shut again. He lets out a held-back sob. His chest is still pounding hard. He rests his head and tries to relax. He could pray. That used to help. It doesn't much anymore though. He bites his lip until he can taste blood.

Though the temptation to relegate himself to his bed is strong, he makes himself stand. Jack's return seems to have prompted the reappearance of the staff, and Will calls tiredly for the bath to be made ready in his room. He's going out. He refuses to give that up.

By half past seven, he's dressed and nervously fidgeting with his necktie, feeling conspicuous at the effort he's gone to. He'd had some tea in his room too, ignoring the niggling feeling of expectation emanating from the lower floor of the house. When he goes downstairs to wait for his cab, Jack appears in the doorway of the study like a great shadow, folding his arms.

"How's your health, Will?" he asks, not unkindly.

"Improving," Will murmurs. He thinks it's the truth.

"That's good, because I need you in shape for this."

Will winces. "I'll try my best."

He hurries out the door as soon as he hears the rattle of wheels outside. The carriage ride is thankfully uneventful. It delivers him not to the circus, as expected, but to a small bistro. He goes inside with a small flame of curiosity burning inside him. The place is very small, nearly deserted- in fact, Hannibal is the only patron. He rises as soon as Will enters, bowing.

Will looks around fleetingly, a faint blush rising to his cheeks. "Hello, Doctor."

"Good evening, Will."

"It's cozy in here."

"Indeed. I am good friends with the owners, and I wanted us to have someplace quiet. I apologize for the delay in our evening's entertainment, but I was likewise delayed at the museum and haven't had time for a bite. I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all." Will sits down with him and nods when Hannibal holds up a carafe of wine in offering.

"Will you eat?"

"Sure."

"I must admit, I never thought I could grow so fond of an American accent before I heard yours, Will," Hannibal comments mildly, "strange how, coming from the right mouth, even the most unfamiliar of sounds can become comforting."

He turns away from Will as a young man comes to the table, and Will is distracted by the paleness of his face and eyes as Hannibal orders softly for them both. When he's gone, Will thinks about Hannibal's words and decides he's not offended.

"Some of them are a little rough around the edges, I guess."

"Not at all, I simply found them unremarkable before you."

"I found yours remarkable almost immediately," Will admits, honestly, "never heard anyone talk the way you do."

Hannibal suppresses a smile. "Then you know what I mean. Yours is almost musical."

"Yours is a tapestry. I can never untangle all the threads."

"There's a lot to untangle. Lithuanian, French, mostly."

Will nods. "It's the French that does it. Just familiar enough."

"From your time in New Orleans? You speak it?"

"*Mais oui, cher.*" Will gives it the Creole drawl.

"*Tres bien.*" Hannibal's eyes are warm.

Will chuckles. "It's not quite the same- like all languages, it's adapted to its surroundings, like a living thing."

"Evolved like my beloved insects," Hannibal agrees, "I'm sure Doctor Darwin considers his theory applicable to social elements as well as genetics."

The silent waiter brings their food and Hannibal thanks him absently. Will does too, looking down at his plate and then around the little brasserie again. "It's so quiet in here."

"They're closed," Hannibal clarifies.

Will raises his eyebrows. "I see."

Hannibal doesn't seem inclined to elaborate further. Will doesn't press, just politely eats his dinner. Hannibal delicately picks at steak tartare, ruby cuts against his pearly canines putting Will in mind of crime scene photos. He never takes off his gloves, which is rather eccentric, and he also drinks more than he eats, but Will can't exactly judge him for that. He doesn't show any sign of drunkenness.

Will is himself finding it necessary to supplement himself with water or else risk making a fool of himself. The wine here is strong and rich, and Hannibal is, as ever, an engaging dinner partner. Their solemn waiter only comes back once more, and Will refuses an after-dinner drink. Hannibal does as well. He stands without any indication that there's a check to take care of and accepts his and Will's coats, holding Will's out for him.

Will, to his general surprise, allows himself to be... handled. It's becoming a more and more frequent occurrence around Hannibal, he's noticed. There's a quiet, insistent hiss for *more* in his belly that he quashes fiercely. He needs to be polite. He bares his teeth back in a strange smile when Hannibal leans to meet his gaze.

"Come, Will. It's not a long walk from here." He offers his arm, again.

Once again, Will hesitates to take it.

Hannibal looks vaguely wounded. "Do you not trust me?"

"It's not you I don't trust."

"No one will see us, I can assure you."

Will frowns, but Hannibal's gaze is steady as granite. Compelled by his simple confidence, Will takes his arm with a slight sigh. It irritates him, how much he likes it. How quietly satisfied Hannibal seems, to please him so. And to his surprise, not a single pair of eyes turns to them as they make their way to the docks.

It's a relief: he wants to keep this to himself a little longer. Like a little jewel tucked in his waistcoat pocket- like one of Hannibal's beetles embroidered on his tie. It shines in the darkness of his mind, reflecting onto the walls. Even the occasional pale child in the streets doesn't give him pause. Tonight, as they're walking side by side along the docks and the moon casts a bright smear on the water, Will can't imagine feeling afraid around Hannibal. Well-bred Londoners really oughtn't walk through this street at this time of night, but here they are.

And, he thinks mildly, neither of them are Londoners. The types of establishments Hannibal seems to favor might look well-bred, but they cater to the fringes, if you have the eyes to see it.

"Here we are," Hannibal says suddenly, as music and lights set the air in the distance aglow.

"Oh, my," Will smiles. It looks dreamlike. He wonders how much of these little escapist trips to other worlds are for his particular benefit. Hannibal would surely not tell him were he to ask; he does not tend to enjoy when Will questions his motives.

"Just a small matter of business to attend to for the exhibition," Hannibal tells him smoothly, "and then the rest of the night is ours."

He's right: it only takes minutes to find the stage hand from the main tent. Hannibal draws him into quiet discussion for a few minutes, and then they shake hands. Visibly satisfied with the arrangement, Hannibal returns to Will's side and leads him away through the crowds.

They wind amongst the stalls and shows, comfortably close and both smiling, occasionally stopping to marvel at the many displays and tricks. Will uses a couple of pennies to shyly buy them hot ciders as a shield against the chill, and they sip as they walk, the scent of cinnamon and cloves filling the air around them in clouds of fragrant steam. The lights are so entrancing, so many lanterns lit with colored glass. Will is distracted by a pair of showmen juggling fire until he feels Hannibal take his elbow.

"This way," he whispers. They hand off their empty cups and Will lets himself be led into the dark mouth of a horror house. A short flash of panic; Will pauses on the threshold.

"Hannibal, I don't think -"

"I won't let anything hurt you," Hannibal says, a tad teasing.

"I'm not overly fond of mirrors," Will explains.

That gets him a soft furrowing of brows, but it's concern. "Very well."

"No," Will protests softly, "don't do that. I'll go in. It's nothing."

Hannibal glances around, and then gently touches Will's hair. "Brave boy."

He leads him in by the hand. Will keeps his eyes diverted to start with, just keeping his eyes on the shuffling shapes of those around them, but the mirrors along the walls change and warp their shapes and soon Will finds himself grinning at the sight of the portly, peevish Hannibal opposite them. With Hannibal's hand in his, it's all in good fun. His little, pleased smile is too much for Will to resist.

They venture further into the twisting corridors, emerging in a seemingly endless labyrinth of mirrors now. It's crowded here, and for the first time Will tenses. A squeeze forms amongst the bodies and Hannibal has to let go of his hand, and suddenly he's afloat in a sea of strangers, endlessly repeated around him in the walls. Shoulders tensed against the jostle of unfamiliar bodies around him, Will looks for Hannibal and instead sees only his own face, frightened and pale in the dark river of coats and hats. Hands seem to pluck at his sleeves.

He keeps walking, pushing through the crowds, and suddenly he's alone with nothing but his own reflection staring back at him. In the strange overhead light, he looks like a skeleton in an overcoat.

The soft hiss of his name passes across his ear and he whips around, cold panic rising in his chest. The lights flicker, and when they steady, a new figure stands amongst the infinite reflected Wills. A street child again, but older, unfamiliar - menacing.

"What do you want?" Will asks, barely managing to restrain the tremble from his voice. He knows an agent of the damned when he sees one.

"We're waiting for you," the creature hisses. Maybe he is familiar- has Will seen him lingering on the market near the house?

"Why? What do you want from me? I've told your master; he will have none of me," he growls.

"My master will have all of you," the boy replies, and then he licks his lips slowly. "Every morsel."

Will has never wanted to strike another human being so much in his life. Except for one; except for Mason Verger. "Get away from me," he warns.

It dances closer instead, rictus grin and the faint scent of rotten blood. Will flinches automatically, even before he feels the impossible sensation of its tongue on his throat.

"All that blood," it breathes, "all that meat. The meal he'd make of you--" the lights flicker.

"No!" Will lashes out blindly, fist flying into the mirror, cracking under the force. He stumbles against it, falling to his knees and letting out a ragged noise, half sob, half plea. An instant later, he knows he is alone again. The strange mirror hall seems echoingly empty, exitless, oppressive. Will reaches out for the cool press of glass and turns his hot forehead against it where he's knelt. This time, he ought to pray, but all he can muster is the forlorn whisper of Hannibal's name.

"Will?" He sees him reflected in the glass, the shadow of him looming, warped for the briefest of seconds. In the dim light, his eyes look flecked with crimson.

"Hannibal," he says again, slumping when he feels hands on his shoulders.

"What happened?"

"Please, please take me out of here," Will murmurs.

"Yes, anything you want." His hands are cool as he tests Will's temperature before, satisfied, he helps him up.

Will lets himself be led out of the maze and straight to a cab. In the dark, enclosed space, he leans into Hannibal's body and relaxes only minutely when Hannibal's hand comes to rest on his crown, holding him close. He doesn't attempt to explain. Hannibal doesn't ask. It seems almost impossible that he could be so kind about it. It's only when the carriage stops that he realizes Hannibal has brought him to his own home and not Jack's.

He looks up at the grand facade with a little trepidation and immediately regrets teasing him about sleeping at the museum: it's beautiful. Hannibal leads him inside with a hand on his elbow, taking him directly into a lounge where he takes his coat and seats him in a chair before going to the sideboard and pouring two glasses of whisky. Will takes his with a grateful murmur.

"Are you ready to talk about it?" Hannibal asks politely once he's sat in the matching chair.

A million dollar question. Will sighs, looking uncertainly at the floor. "I don't know what I can tell you that won't sound quite unhinged," he says.

Hannibal leans in to touch his wrist. "Tell me anyway." Will takes several deep breaths before he can persuade himself to start.

"I am... stalked," he says quietly, turning his face away. "By creatures of the Devil. I cannot escape them, it seems."

Hannibal's face doesn't change, but his head tilts. "Why you?"

Will laughs bitterly. "You think I know? Perhaps I'm cursed. Marked by my 'talent'."

"And what is your talent, Will?"

Will shrugs, sipping his drink. "I read people."

Hannibal nods, like as if this is a rational, comprehensible answer. "Can you read me?"

"You wouldn't want me to. It makes people feel violated."

"As you wish. Do not assume that is disbelief, though."

Will looks at him, trying not to appear dubious. "You're too calm."

"Am I?"

"No one is ever that calm when I tell them I'm a psychic medium, no," Will mutters acidly.

Hannibal tilts his head. "I'm a scientist. I've seen creatures that see with sound. Things that exist deep in the fathomless ocean that glow. Animals that drink the blood of others to survive. It would be remiss of me to think that only the earthly are capable of such mysticism." He pauses, then refocuses on Will. "Tell me of the man that confronted you."

"It was a boy," Will says weakly, feeling foolish, "but he was - I've seen him before, following me. He was talking in riddles about his master."

"What did he say?" Hannibal presses, like they're merely discussing a dinner companion.

Will bites his lip. "He said 'we're waiting for you'." He sighs and adds, "He licked my neck, Hannibal. I feel like I need to wash him off, but - how can I really? Could I *burn* him away? They're everywhere." At the thought, he touches the skin, remembering the cool slide of his flesh. "I'll never be rid of this," he mutters, almost to himself, "the dead and damned will always follow me. You'd do well to stay away from me - I should leave you alone."

"On the contrary," Hannibal says, taking another calm sip of his drink then setting it aside, "if strange creatures intend to accost you in the street, next time it will be clear they must go through me."

Will laughs softly despite himself, but he's warmed by it. "I shall alert the legions of the damned, Doctor."

"Oh no," Hannibal smiles. "I shall do that myself."

Will feels touched. He doesn't know what to say except for: "Thank you."

Hannibal leans forward, touching his cheek. His fingers are cool from his glass. Something sharp and urgent surges in Will. His exhale trembles.

"Hannibal."

"Do I overstep, Will?"

"No. You could never." He looks down at his shoes. "I'm not a normal man."

"I know that. Neither am I."

Will feels the glass in his hand lifted away, feels himself lifted to his feet. Hannibal's hands draw him in close, and he goes, still trembling.

"You don't have to be a normal man for me, Will," Hannibal says, voice very soft, "I will never, ever ask you to be anything but what you are."

"What am I?" he breathes.

"A gift. A work of art. A new species." His eyes go to Will's lips, telegraphing his intentions.

Ever a slave to the dark parts of himself, Will just closes his eyes when Hannibal bends to kiss him. Something ignites when their lips touch, making Will grasp at Hannibal impulsively, fingers curling into the crisp lapels of his suit. Hannibal's own hands smooth up to his waist under his jacket. It's more than Will can stand, but he refuses to let it go, stroking the soft wool under his fingers as Hannibal's tongue sweeps over his teeth.

"Open for me," he whispers. Or is it in Will's head? He complies to the demand anyway, readily. Shivers climb up and down his spine as Hannibal kisses him with a tenderness that brings Will out in gooseflesh. He's overcome by the sensations Hannibal inspires. A soft whine escapes him before he can hold it back. He wants to feel shame, but other things are pushing it out. Hannibal's hands, for example, curling into his hair. Everything Will has ever wanted and prayed not to.

"Hannibal," he breathes into his mouth, tone pleading, though he doesn't know what for. Sanity seems far away. Hannibal's touch is the only thing he can feel. He thinks he must simply crave 'more'.

"If God has forsaken me," he sighs restlessly, "and the Devil has yet to consume me, then it is up to you to take me."

"I alone deserve you," Hannibal murmurs. His fingertips touch at Will's cheek delicately. When he traces Will's jaw, their edges feel sharp, a sweet little unseen blade.

Will doesn't understand, but he agrees. He is no innocent - he knows how to touch, if touch is allowed. Hannibal's fingers are skimming down his throat, pausing over his jugular.

"Your pulse is fast," he murmurs.

"You sound surprised."

"I'm not. I wish I knew if it was simply fear."

"No, not just." Will gasps as Hannibal's mouth skims his throat.

"Not just. That's good." He lays kisses under his jaw, everything about his movements careful and savouring. "I will take you, if you want me to," he murmurs.

Will closes his eyes against the fierceness of the want that rails against the insides of his ribs. It takes everything he has to let himself nod.

"Come upstairs with me," Hannibal says, with a single soft nip to his jaw by his ear. It's easy to let him lead him- Will is dizzy with how easy. His body has evidently decided it doesn't need his mind.

Hannibal has decided he doesn't need his clothes. He's stripping Will of his layers with careful precision. When Will makes to return the gesture, he pushes his hands down gently.

"Wait. Let me look at you."

"I don't want to be looked at," Will protests faintly.

"And why not?"

Will moans softly in mingled desire and distress. Hannibal soothes him by leaning down to kiss his chest as he unfastens Will's trousers. It gives Will a moment to take in the gloom of his bedroom, scarcely lit by candles, the bed a towering cage of carved black wood with a rich burgundy canopy. It looks like the raft to Hades. His skin craves the touch of its sheets.

"I'm used to hiding," he says finally, eyes still on the bed as Hannibal divests him of his shoes, socks, spectacles and trousers with the gentle, patient motions of a doctor.

"You need to hide nothing from me, Will."

"And yet you're still hiding from me."

"You may certainly strip me bare, dearest Will." He guides Will toward the bed, and then draws him into another kiss before his new anxieties can take root.

Will grips his shirt and tugs, hard. The buttons burst under the attack, flying off in all directions, and Hannibal fixes Will with a still, ferocious look for a split second before he all but shoves Will down into bed, letting him push his clothes off without ceremony. Every slice of skin revealed brings a fresh shudder of pleasure. Will can't hold back from gripping Hannibal too-tight, fingers digging into the meat of his thighs as, now totally bare, they rock together in the soft dark of Hannibal's bed. His mouth is like a brand on Will's skin. It sears down his throat and chest and Will bows up into it with abandon. His body seeks. It finds.

"Hannibal- oh..."

"Yes, my darling."

Will hauls him closer, pressing their bodies together, needing the press of Hannibal's heat. "More. Please."

Obliging with nothing but a smile, Hannibal reaches down to wrap a hand around him, and after some shifting, around them both. A groan escapes Will, rough and unschooled. He ought to focus on participating, but he can only blindly beg and take. He manages to curl his hand around Hannibal's.

Hannibal croons in his ear, "That's right. Show me. I won't recoil from your desires."

Will wants to revel in their mess. Sticky fluid and pumping blood. He drags the nails of his other hand down Hannibal's back with a hiss. Hannibal growls against his breastbone, setting his teeth into the ledge of his collarbone and nipping sharply. Will cries out, need throbbing between them.

"Hannibal-" he breathes, "please... I want you."

"How?"

"Inside me."

He thinks he feels Hannibal shiver. He licks over Will's throat slowly. That feels almost as good as his hand on Will's cock. He lets Will rock up into it, and the friction of sensitive skin mingling with Hannibal's cool palm has him panting soon.

"Be patient, beloved," Hannibal murmurs.

It's the worst thing he could hear- he can't possibly comply. "I don't care if you hurt me," Will tells him stubbornly.

"Fortunately for you, I do." He kisses Will again, slowly enough that he clings by the end. He's still stroking them slow, their skin growing slicker with every rock.

"Please," Will gasps. "Do you have something we can use?"

Hannibal kisses his throat again and pulls away gently. He leans over to a box on the bedside and Will watches with barely leashed impatience. The feeling of violence crawling freely through his veins is unfamiliar. He nips at his side. It triggers nothing more than an approving hum from Hannibal, which does nothing to quell him. It's startlingly good to be the one moving him.

He uses his nails again, and Hannibal comes back to him with a soft snarl. His eyes seem to spark red in the light from the candles as he bows his head; devours the skin of Will's throat and chest again, slinking down low between his thighs. His fingers creep between Will's thighs as his tongue passes over the thin skin of his pelvis. Will arches up to accept the invasive push into soft flesh. Slick and steady, opening him up with long, thrusting presses that make him clench and cry.

It's too good. He shouldn't be allowed it, surely. He can't say no, can only say please. Hannibal's ministrations continue steadily. He nips at the flat of Will's stomach when his bridging rocks get too impatient. Arousal sounds in him like notes of a piano, sweet and clean. Hannibal's fingers find something in him that alights him with pleasure.

"*Oh*- Hannibal- now."

Another nip, and a twist of Hannibal's fingers to go with it. Will bares his teeth at him until he relents. He sinks inside Will between one breath and the next, nudging his legs up around his flanks, leaving him gasping with the blunt stretch of him. Hands grip Will's thighs,

holding him where Hannibal wants him, and Will yields like putty, tipping his head back into the sheets and groaning rough and unschooled.

Hannibal's mouth rests hot as a brand against his throat, the way he moves inside Will lighting him up with a fearsome need. Pain braids with a dizzy pleasure. He bows up with his body, breathing hard, already overwrought. If Hannibal let go of him, he thinks he might blow away like smoke. Instead, he's holding on tight enough to bruise.

Good. Will wants to see them. He wants to think about this and remember Hannibal fucking him with his hair falling out of style across his forehead and his jaw clenched with effort. He looks like a great beast above him, teeth bared when Will grabs gently at his shoulder and chest and rocks up harder into his thrusts with a groan. He feels like a beast himself.

Hannibal grips at his thighs and holds him steady as he complies to his silent demands for more. The only noise in the room is their gasps and groans, until Hannibal shifts one hand against the headboard to drive into him harder and Will can't hold back his choked moan, holding his thighs tense to his chest. He feels his body starting to clench and tighten.

"Let me see," Hannibal breathes, voice a feral hiss, "let me feel it."

Will digs his nails into the meat of his back. It sets a coppery edge under the briny heat of sex, and Hannibal snarls, sharp and deadly in the dark. Will feels his own lips pulled back, vision swirling black and red and white as Hannibal's hand returns to his aching, dripping cock, stroking tight and fast now. Will chokes out a sound that could hardly be considered a word, or human. And then Hannibal is fucking him faster and Will is coming before he can control it, pearly strands shooting hard and messy over his belly and Hannibal's hand as he writhes through his release.

He's utterly insensible for those long, drawn out pulses. It seems to last for longer than anything. If only he could feel like this in every moment. When he comes back to himself, he's shaking hard, wrung out and overwhelmed.

"Hannibal," he pleads.

"Tell me."

"Let go. I can take it."

Hannibal cups his face, bending to kiss him. Will can barely look upon the naked want on his face. "I know you can." He nips Will's chin lightly, then he picks up his pace again.

It's enough to make Will moan continuously, a constant surge of stimulation; an overflow of pleasure. He feels like a goblet spilling wine. Hannibal laps it up with long, drugging kisses as he rocks himself to completion, finishing in a few hard, shaking thrusts that leave Will clenching strands of his hair in shaking fingers even after he stills. They're both racked with tremors. It's so much. Will can't contain himself from clutching.

Hannibal seems just as elated. He leans to kiss Will, one hand coming up gently to the corner of his eyes. Abruptly, Will realises Hannibal is touching tears. He feels no shame, only

release.

"Will," Hannibal's voice is so soft, full of tenderness. "You're beautiful."

"Don't say that."

"But you are. Nothing could be lovelier."

Will turns his face as if from a cold wind. Hannibal's fingers tighten on his jaw. He's quiet, then he kisses under Will's ear gently. "You taste divine."

Will stares at the canopy, stroking his hair, then sighs. "Thank you."

"Any and every time you wish," Hannibal murmurs.

Will thinks he might have used up his resources for speech. Hannibal has bewitched him, truly. Now, he's pulling away carefully to lie alongside him, one hand smoothing up his chest. His nails scrape over the ribs bracketing Will's heart, making him shiver. He covers Hannibal's hand with his own.

"Will you reach in and take it?" he asks woozily.

"Is it mine to take?"

It doesn't take much consideration. "I think you should have it. Preserve it somehow, maybe in a jar. Take it out and examine it every now and then."

"Perhaps I'll keep it amongst my other curios," Hannibal says, expression raw with understanding despite his stillness.

"Will you?"

They look at one another in the dark, Hannibal's eyes catching the light from candles like the night shine of a cat. He wets his lips, then shakes his head.

"I think I should like to keep it somewhere closer to home."

"Would you keep it safe?"

"Always, certainly."

"Better with you, then. "

Hannibal sighs, nails digging in gently again. "I will do my best to be worthy of it." He leans in to kiss Will again, long and slow and enough to addle his wits completely.

When they part, Will is quiet for a while before he murmurs, "I like your house."

"I feel as if you've barely seen it," Hannibal says, not without humor.

"Perhaps later you could give me a tour," Will murmurs, already on the edge of sleep.

He feels Hannibal stroke his hair. "In the morning, maybe."

Will doesn't hear another word. He's deeply asleep in moments.

*

A soft click over Will's ear is enough to indicate it's safe to leave him sleeping without disturbing him. Hannibal slips silently into his robe and down toward the kitchens, lighting the oil lamps as he goes. As soon as Will had fallen asleep, Hannibal's satisfied smile had faded to blankness as he yielded to cold, roiling anger. He'd been able to smell the stale traces of death on him left behind by unclean hands. He knows precisely who he's looking for, and where to find him.

The kitchen is nearly pitch black, a few hopeful strays lingering in the laundry room, twitching for meat. Hannibal bares his teeth until only one remains.

"Master," Matthew hisses. He's fed recently, Hannibal can tell from his hectically bright eyes. He opens his mouth to speak, but Hannibal silences him with a wave of his hand.

"I said no one was to touch him. To go near him."

Matthew doesn't bother to act innocent. "It's taking too long that way."

"It doesn't need to be fast, it needs to be consensual," Hannibal spits, "your actions were discourteous, and reckless."

"At least he knows what I am."

Hannibal can't stop himself. He grabs Matthew by the throat with crushing force, lip twitching with his efforts of restraint. "Yes. And now I know what you are, too."

The insolent boy merely sneers up at him, still stinking of blood and of Will. His Will. It's too easy to sink his fangs in. Matthew attempts to struggle, but it's futile; Hannibal drains him before grabbing his wretched head and twisting sharply.

Ordinarily, he'd insist on removing the body himself. Tonight he has other things to occupy him, so he'll have to leave that to the others. Let it be a lesson to them on what it means to disobey.

"Please," he tells the creeping silhouettes in the doorway, "do not leave a mess."

"Yes," they assure him, voices low, some creaky from disuse. "Yes, Master, we promise."

He goes back upstairs without a word, catching sight of Chiyoh where she lingers at his door, too brazen to be guilty about her spying. He glares at her too, but she never cowers.

"I didn't think you'd bring him back so soon," she says softly.

"He's not ready," Hannibal admits, pain in every syllable. "But he asked me to."

"Asked you to what?"

"To take him home." This is the only home Hannibal will acknowledge for Will.

Chiyoh glances at the door again, and then she nods. "I'll get things ready for morning."

Hannibal nods in response and slips back through the door to Will. He's still asleep, brows drawn against some subconscious worry. Hannibal sheds his robe and curls back around him. He'll barely sleep- it doesn't do him much use anymore- but it's enough to envelop himself in his soft scent and revel in the notes of their togetherness.

Even sated, the scent of Will's blood rushing under his skin remains an exquisite temptation. He tucks his nose against his nape and inhales deeply. Will's hand settles over his arm and he shifts into the bracket of Hannibal's body in sleep.

I will never let you go, Hannibal tells him. And his 'never' is more than a word, it's a vow.

Chapter 3

Will wakes to the sensation of breath on his face, but when he bolts upright in bed there's nothing but his ugly dreams crawling back under the bed. He squints in the gloom, the shutters closed, and sees he's alone. He's still in Hannibal's house. God save him, how much of an embarrassment was he last night?

He touches his chest and finds scratches, and his face heats in horror at the obvious state of himself. He's an absolute wreck of scents and aches and tangled hair. He takes a short, panicked breath and vaults out of bed to look for his britches, urgency growing when he can't find them. Instead, a grey silk robe is draped prominently over the bedside chair. He glares at it for a few long moments before he pulls it on.

The door opens quietly as he's still tying the sash. Hannibal enters, already fully dressed. "Good morning, Will," he says softly.

"I've overslept, I'm sorry," Will says quickly.

"No apologies necessary. I've taken the liberty of having your suit pressed, it will be ready shortly, but I'd love for you to join me for breakfast if you have time."

Will hesitates. He'd rather been planning on escape. "Of course. Thank you."

"That will also be brought up in just moments." Hannibal steps closer, the first hint of anything that's not complete propriety. Will diverts his gaze but feels color come to his cheeks.

"Good morning," he says softly.

"And good morning to you." Hannibal touches his cheek. "Are you well?"

Will thinks. "I uh- I actually don't remember the last time I slept so soundly."

He thinks he sees Hannibal's eyes darken with pleasure. "You were worn out."

"Yes," Will mumbles, still blushing.

There's a knock on the door. Hannibal brushes his thumb over Will's cheek before he goes to get breakfast. Will hears a few words passed between him and a servant, then he returns with the tray in his own hands. He sets the small table by the windows with an easy grace and beckons Will to take a seat as he pours tea and sets out full plates with a contented smile.

Will summons his best company manners and joins him. "This looks delicious," he offers. When he takes a bite, he's vindicated in that assumption. "You've gone above and beyond for me," he says.

"No such thing for those we care about."

"You care about me?" Will whispers automatically, eyes flickering away into a corner.

Hannibal doesn't sound concerned, or embarrassed. "You didn't know?"

"I just - assumed -"

"What did you assume, Will?"

"That I was some sort of charity case, I suppose."

"I'm not prone to false declarations, I assure you. I care very much about you. You delight me."

Will's face burns. "In that case, I guess I was wrong."

"There's a first time for everything." Hannibal looks gently amused. Will tries not to smile.

They eat and sip richly-fragranced coffee until a second soft knock sounds on the door.

"Excuse me, Will." Hannibal rises to go to the door. When he returns, he has Will's suit, which he hangs on a screen in the corner.

"Thank you," Will says, draining his coffee. Hannibal refills his, sitting with his legs crossed comfortably as Will goes to dress.

The washroom is state of the art. Will washes and shaves with heated water left by the staff and emerges when he's dressed, feeling like yesterday's nightmare in the mirror hall is a distant memory. Hannibal is waiting in the same chair, his stillness palpable.

"I hope I haven't kept you," Will says mildly.

"I only regret that I must send you away."

"Well, hopefully it's not for good?" He can't keep it from sounding like a question.

"Certainly not. May I call on you this evening?"

"Of course. You might meet Jack," he adds belatedly, hoping against hope that he won't.

"Oh, he's returned?"

"He has." Will sighs. "It's these murders."

Hannibal raises a brow. "The ones in the papers?"

Will nods. "They're distinctive."

"The papers seem to enjoy making Ripper comparisons," Hannibal replies.

"Yes. A new Ripper though, this one." He smiles tightly. "I ought not to say anything more without permission."

"I understand," Hannibal bows his sleek head in a nod. He rises and comes close. Will doesn't see the kiss coming until Hannibal is in his space, hands framing his cheeks. It's as intimate as a clandestine X on the bottom of a love letter. And it's far too short.

Will is thinking about it for a long time after though, when they've said goodbye and as he's walking home, to where Jack waits. From his face alone Will knows he has a new crime scene- no clairvoyance necessary. He's been waiting for Will, and he isn't happy about it.

"Good night?" he asks, somewhat cattily for a man in his fifties.

"I was accosted in the street partway through it, but yes, it ended well," Will snips back.

"Accosted? By who?"

"A street urchin, that's all." Will feels a surprising reluctance to tell Jack the whole story.

"Would have thought you could handle a street urchin," Jack says, clearly believing none of it. He's not wrong; Will can handle himself just fine if it comes to a fight, he'd simply... frozen.

"I haven't been feeling myself."

"Well, we're due at the scene in thirty minutes, so I suggest you start."

Ever the caring employer. Will curls his lip. "Right."

He doesn't bother changing; Hannibal's servants have rendered his ordinary suit much neater than it probably started the day yesterday. It still smells faintly of Hannibal's warm, unusual cologne. That thought bolsters him as he waits with Jack for a cab.

The scene is in East End, where the cramped back-to-backs sit practically on top of one another, the streets narrow and filthy. Will can see Jack bracing himself, and he tries to do the same.

The little, rundown house reeks before they're even in the door, hanging mournfully off its hinges. It doesn't look like anyone has lived here for quite some time, itself an oddity in this area. Will extracts a handkerchief from his pocket and puts it over his mouth as the murder miasma grows stronger.

"Where is the body?" he murmurs to Jack. "Inside?"

"What's left of it."

Fantastic. "It's clear?"

"Yes, it's all yours, Will."

He nods and steps inside. They've left a lantern for him on a rickety table, which he gratefully takes up as he slinks forward through the dismal little living area, treading carefully in the half light. The smell is strongest in the kitchen, the room buzzing with flies.

He sees the pools of blood - plural, but unusually small - before he takes in what has been done to the body. And then he sees the face. He stumbles back from the gawping head of the man from the mirror hall, staring at him from its place on the mantel over the fire. The rest of him- like Jack said, what's left- is scattered across the flagstone floor in a distinct shape. Even as he tries to figure out how, Will can't help seeing why - what shape the gory remains have been formed into. He tilts his head and steps back to take it in. A constellation, he thinks, with the head a grisly Polaris.

"Ursa Minor." His eyes move over the scene. "Lovingly depicted in that which disgusted me." He turns away, avoiding the doorway through which Jack waits. He absolutely cannot tell the police that the murderer terrorizing London is Lucifer. They'd have him committed.

As he looks at the parts that are left, mostly bone and gristle, he sees marks in the meat like teeth.

"They're food, Jack," he mutters.

"What was that?" Jack comes to the kitchen doorway, wincing at the abattoir within.

"Mouths to feed," Will says, "there's a Ripper for sure, but not all the deaths are down to him. He has- apostles." He bites his lip. "They eat that which displeases him."

Jack squeezes the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger. "Cannibals, Will? How am I supposed to take cannibals to Scotland Yard?"

"I suppose that's your problem."

"And who's 'he', Will?"

"If I had to guess?" Will picks up a hunk of spinal column, picked nearly clean. "I'd say a monster, wouldn't you?"

"*Do* you have to guess?"

"Not really."

Jack exhales wearily. "So this is like the thing before."

"It's exactly like that, Jack." Flesh puppets and demons within.

At the sight of Will's familiar, vacant Seeing, Jack straightens his broad shoulders immediately, if slowly. "Maybe I shouldn't have brought you in on this."

"Who else would you suggest?"

They both know there's no answer to that. Another big sigh. "Come to the station with me. We can discuss what to tell them on the way."

"I'm not interested in thinking up ways to make this plausible to the public, Jack. I have my own research to do."

That gets a frown, but Jack doesn't argue. In fact, he throws his hands up, tucks them in his pockets, and leaves the stinking kitchen. He must be feeling shaken. As if Will isn't. But... he isn't really, just... numb. Casting a last look around at the mess, he makes eye contact with the head on the mantel a final time.

"Who's the meal now?" he mutters, lip curled.

Something about this, Will knows, is for him. He needs to find it, and understand it. And stop it.

He tosses the spinal knob back on the floor, letting it displace the pattern he'd found. Finally, he follows after Jack back out to the street, and they get back into the waiting carriage. His mind is replaying the scene at the tenement, over and over. He needs to talk to Margot.

"Jack," he interjects into the silence, "drop me in Mayfair?"

"You're going to see Miss Verger?"

"Is that a problem?"

"I suppose I ought not to be alarmed at you visiting a historian who specialises in occultism?"

"I think you should be more alarmed if I didn't."

Jack sighs slowly. "Very well."

They part ways at Mayfair and Will walks to Margot Verger's resplendent townhouse. The butler who answers the door gives him a distinct once-over.

"Is Miss Verger here, sir?"

"Your card?"

"Tell her Will Graham is here and that it's somewhat of an emergency."

That should alarm Margot sufficiently. As expected, he's soon shown in. Margot is impeccable, but pale.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, Miss Verger."

"That's awfully formal, don't you think?" she murmurs.

He sighs, sitting down opposite her. He takes her hand gently and shucks off the act. "Margot. I need your help."

"Anything. You know that."

"The recent murders around London - there's something inhuman behind them. I need to find out what. There's many creatures, I know that much, but they answer to one thing they call 'Master'. They feed off the blood and flesh of the living."

She nods attentively.

"They left me a clue - the Ursa Minor constellation in flesh and bone."

Margot flinches, but to her credit immediately hums and goes into a murmured catalogue of celestial mythology.

Her eyes widen a bit as she looks at Will again.

"This is simplistic, perhaps, but in Slavic tales it is the great doomsday beast, which is guarded by the Morning and Evening Star."

"What is it called?"

"Simargl is its name, but I mean to say... it is the creature of the Morning Star, and that concerns me most."

"Why does that concern you most?" He knows why, but he wants her to say it.

Margot eyes him steadily. "The Devil requires a host, Will, we both know that."

He shakes his head. "He has followers. I've seen them. They're something different from what your brother was."

"It sounds like you have your own ideas."

He closes his eyes, letting his mind take him back to the tenement; back further to the mirror hall. "They don't hate, Margot. They're just...hungry. Consumingly, endlessly *hungry*."

He thinks of the man in the mirrors, whose tongue had crawled over his skin, seeking blood. Frustrated, he spears his fingers through his hair. He remembers suddenly what Hannibal said last night: "*I've seen creatures that need the blood of others to survive.*"

"Vampires," Will murmurs.

Margot laughs automatically, a short, mirthless burst. "The papers bleat about another Ripper, and you're telling me it's Nosferatu instead." Then she pauses, the smile sliding off her face.

"What is it?"

"Nosferatu. It's what Romanians call the Devil."

Will feels cold lap at his insides like a tide. "Yes," he realises, "you're right."

"Vampires -" he can see her memory unspooling what she's read, "will continue to suck the blood of innocents until the spirit has been exorcised, either by driving a stake through the corpse, or by cutting off the head, or by extracting the heart and burning it- "

"Stop," Will orders her, and she does, her expression only mildly stricken. Will puts his hand to his chest.

Will you reach in and take it? he'd asked Hannibal, flushed with release.

"When we killed Mason, we didn't drive the Devil's servants out of London," he breathes.
"We invited him in person."

"We must go to Doctor Bloom," Margot blurts. "Our recordings..."

Will feels his chest seize. "You're right. I'll go hail a carriage."

She nods. "I'll get my coat."

*

They arrive at Doctor Bloom's practice inside half an hour. Her secretary, frowning, taps on the door of her office, murmurs something to the doctor, and promptly excuses herself. Doctor Bloom stands and takes them both in, then goes to Margot to take her outstretched hands, stoppering up her polite apologies.

"Don't apologize, what's wrong-?" Her eyes dart to Will, who is decidedly not apologizing, but surely no more composed in his demeanor than Margot. "I confess to surprise at seeing you here together," she continues.

"We need the recordings of our sessions immediately, they must be destroyed, there's no time to explain," Will puts in hurriedly.

"Surely that's an overreaction," Doctor Bloom murmurs.

"Doctor Bloom." Margot widens her eyes. "You know what we've told you. You know what walks amongst us." When the doctor still hesitates, Margot drops her voice to a whisper.
"Alana. Please."

Will diverts his attention: he doesn't want to see too much. "It's for your own protection, as much as ours," he murmurs.

Doctor Bloom bites her lip, then nods. "All right. Let me get them."

As she walks back the hallway to wherever she stores the cylinders, Will frowns at his shoes. He'd told Hannibal all about the creature from the mirror hall last night. He ought to go to his office and tell him - what? God, just to take care, he supposes with a suppressed sob of desperation.

Margot touches his shoulder at the sound. "Will?"

He doesn't get a chance to explain, because Doctor Bloom returns, face pale.

"Doctor Bloom-"

"Will, your recordings are gone." She strides to the door and pulls the panel open, peeking into the waiting room. "Blast, I told the girl she could go for her luncheon. I am so sorry, Will, I have no idea what happened. I keep them under lock and key. This has never -"

Will looks at the empty desk where the secretary sits. The new secretary. "What happened to your old desk boy?"

"Renfield?" She waves a dismissive hand. "Followed his heart to a new city, perhaps. No notice whatsoever. Moved out of his lodgings just as suddenly. But that was ages ago, you don't think -"

"He's dead," Will pronounces, with certainty. Both the women blanch, but Will can see it so clearly. He can practically smell the blood. "I need to go," he murmurs. "Please destroy the rest of the cylinders. And - go back to Mayfair together. Margot's people can protect you."

"Will, where are you-?"

"I have to warn someone else who- may come into contact with the damned."

"Be *careful*," Margot urges him.

"I will. Go home, both of you." Will puts his hat back on and dashes back out onto the street, ignoring the carriage: he'll make it faster on foot.

He barely sees a step of the familiar path to the museum, hat pulled low against the chilly drizzle. He strides past the desk, up the stairs to the staff levels, coat billowing behind him. He has no time for English niceties today, he thinks, gritting his teeth. As he turns the final corner, he hears voices, and he sees the door to Hannibal's office open. He just barely makes the connection and stops himself at the corner before he gives himself away. The dark-haired secretary from Doctor Bloom's offices emerges with Hannibal, her expression indecipherable on her serene, angular face.

Will feels his extremities turn to ice, like his heart is suddenly unable to handle the burden of his blood. He can't hear what they're saying, but Hannibal looks pleased by something. The ice creeps further, traveling back along his veins to his chest.

Finally, the secretary turns and leaves. Will conceals himself as she passes. He also forces himself to go back downstairs and ask for Hannibal at the front desk, as politeness would have him do. He doesn't want him to know what he's seen.

When Hannibal appears, Will isn't sure what he's feeling anymore. The predominant emotions seem to be disbelief and anger, neither of which will help him in any way. He forces a smile instead.

"Will," Hannibal beams at him softly, "I didn't think I'd see you again so soon." He doesn't touch Will, but Will can feel how he wants to, like phantom hands on his limbs.

"I'm sorry to bother you at work again."

"Please, don't apologize. Would you like to come up for tea again?"

Will pauses, unsure. "I really don't have time, I'm afraid. In fact, I've come to ask if we can postpone our appointment until tomorrow night."

Hannibal blinks once, and then nods. "Of course, Will. Are you well?"

"Tolerably," Will waves a hand. "I'm afraid I've made a hash of a few household matters in Jack's absence. We need to go through some correspondence today."

"Very well." Hannibal nods. "Thank you for letting me know."

"I apologize for the lateness," Will smiles again, looking up through his glasses, "but at least I came in person."

"It's not a problem at all."

He smiles up at Hannibal again. "So, tomorrow."

"Tomorrow," Hannibal says, with a nod.

Will bites his lower lip, swaying for a moment under the realization that a part of him would still very much like to kiss him. He feels sick.

"Good day, Hannibal," he says instead. He forces himself to leave while he still can.

The rain comes harder now, a worried set to the clouds. It's exactly how he feels. Actually, he's sure he's more terrified than worried. He can't possibly give this suspicion credence, can he?

He returns to Jack's house, still fretting. He'd meant to warn Hannibal, but seeing the secretary had jarred him.

It could be perfectly innocent.

No.

He shakes his head, going to the sideboard to pour himself a whisky. He doesn't believe in coincidences, not anymore. He retrieves his cards from the nightstand in his room and sits down on the floor to spread them out. His fingertips tingle when he touches them. Punishment for ignoring them for so long, perhaps.

He shuffles slowly, listening to the static current of noise that rises from their movement. They whisper to him.

"Please," he whispers, though what he's pleading for sticks in his throat.

It's the first card – *Seven Swords, seven sorrows, betrayal and realization*- he draws that throws him forward into a trembling, blood spattered vision. He recoils automatically, but it's too late. It rushes up to flood his brain.

Hannibal's eyes pierce him, blood running down his chin. Bared teeth, gristle between. He spits the mouthful and cleans the red from his fingers with his tongue. He drops the body and shakes a handkerchief out from his breast pocket with a prim flick of his wrist.

Horried at the arousal he feels, Will flips the next card – *Three Swords*- but it flutters from his grasp, and the vision hits him before he sees it land.

The man from the murder scene, bleeding out on the floor. A dozen shadows converge on him like a Venus fly trap about to close. Hannibal stands tall, aloof, a scrum of darkness at his feet. Will's hands shake at the sight.

"Show me what you are."

He stares hard into the void of his mind, and jerks back when those eyes open again, staring back at him, reflecting crimson in their depths. Half blind, he slides free the final card, and more images trickle forth before he can even turn it. Dread seizes his spine.

They embrace at the center of a swirling, lightless void. Will's head is thrown back, his face suffused with ecstasy. Hannibal's exuding deadliness, swarming with darkness, expression adoring.

Will can't turn away, aware that tears are coursing down his cheeks. He's a fool. A wretched, blind fool. How could he have thought for a moment that he would escape this?

He can still smell blood even as he comes back to himself with a jolt. He lifts his hands, expecting to see it. There's nothing, just scattered cards, the face of the Devil peering up at him. *Entrapment, time to choose.* It's so much more than that. The chained lovers are forlorn beneath Will's fingers. What in God's name is he supposed to do?

He puts a hand over his chest and thinks hard. He has to prove this is what he thinks it is. He may only have one chance - tomorrow. Dinner. He sighs shakily at the thought and gathers up his cards.

They don't tingle at his fingers this time with an impending vision. He reaches for it, but there's nothing. Just silence. He wonders if that's an omen in and of itself. Darkness, and nothing else. As he starts to pack them with his fingers, a wind comes whipping down the chimney, tearing them from his hands with enough force that he feels his thumb slit by the thick stock. They fall around him like snow, landing on his bed and sweeping under the bed. He's still breathing hard when the last card flutters into his lap, upright and strangely smug. An inarticulate cry of woe escapes him before he can stop it.

The Tower, reversed. *Disaster, loss of control, suffering change. Delaying the inevitable.*

It's several minutes before Will can bring himself to start gathering up the cards, moving slowly with the aches in his body; the heaviness of his heart. When he's managed to collect the majority of them back into his hand, he turns the entire stack in his hand out of weary curiosity. The World peeks out from between his fingers and he shakes his head with a sigh. *Completion.*

"Don't tempt me," he whispers.

He packs the cards up to put them back in the case, feeling considerably worse than when he consulted them. The Empress has always been his guiding card- he will have to trust his

instincts this time.

He spends the rest of the night sat on the window seat watching the clouds move ominously over the surface of the fat moon, and when the dawn comes he's still deep in thought. Margot may be able to provide him with more counsel before tonight, and so he sets off for Mayfair as soon as it's tolerably late enough in the morning.

Regardless, Margot looks in a similar state of sleepless when he arrives in her living room. Alana Bloom is there too, Will sees, looking primly dressed as ever but with an edge of shyness to her he's never seen before.

"Doctor Bloom," he greets with a nod.

"Will."

He turns to Margot. "I need to know how to identify a vampire," he says, without preamble.

"Very well. I've done some research." She reaches for a few notes from her desk, leaning back in her seat to read over them. "It is said that they must be invited in to one's home."

"What else?"

"They will recoil from a crucifix or from silver."

Will pauses. He thinks of Hannibal's gloves. A harmless affectation, he'd thought at the time. Will has so many of his own. His fear solidifies.

Margot watches his face. "They are said to abhor holy water, too, and that only the strongest can stand the daylight. It weakens them."

"Right," Will breathes. It still seems like some cosmic joke that he hasn't become aware of yet.

"These tests require proximity," she cautions.

"I'm aware of that. I think I have an opportunity."

"My God, Will," she shakes her head, incredulous. "Why you?"

"Same reason as last time, I guess." He lets himself sigh about it.

Margot reaches for his hand. "Let me help you. Let *us* help you."

"We might be able to do something," Alana adds, "three heads are better than one."

"Not this time. I don't want you in danger- not again," he adds softly to Margot.

"You shouldn't go alone."

"Jack will be with me."

She frowns, then nods. "All right. Just - wait here for a moment."

She leaves the room, and Will stares at Alana's shoes until he hears returning footsteps approach. Kneeling in front of him where he's sat, Margot proffers a sleek brass pistol, small and richly engraved - a lady's weapon. Despite everything, Will laughs faintly at the sight of it, relieved just to have something burst the bubble of terror in him.

Margot admonishes him with a widening of her pale eyes. "It's loaded with a silver bullet," she tells him seriously. "I thought it was a curiosity when my mentor gave it to me, but perhaps - if there's even a chance -"

"Yes, all right. I understand."

"Don't be afraid to use it."

"I won't- and listen. Both of you." He takes her gently by the shoulders. "Don't worry about me anymore, alright? I know what I have to do."

"You have to know I will."

"I just wish you wouldn't."

"Why?"

Because it will be easier on you when I'm gone. He sighs, then squeezes her again lightly. "Just promise me you'll stay safe, yes? No heroics. You girls have to look after one another."

They exchange worried glances. Alana takes Margot's hand gently.

"We promise, Will."

He smiles at them. "All right."

The smile drops off his face as soon as he leaves the mansion. He makes his way home in a faint daze. He can't decide if he needs to tell Jack about this. He should. The double-edged problem is: getting Jack to believe him, and making sure he doesn't take control of the situation. Hannibal will kill Jack in two movements, he knows. He can't let that happen. Best to keep it under his hat. Silver, holy water, a crucifix... he can manage that. He can do this.

He goes home and is quietly, thoroughly sick when he tries to eat a cold luncheon. His insides howl with dread. He takes the time to go down to the kitchen and instruct the cook on table settings. Can't be too obvious. He asks the housekeeper to polish the formal silverware. There's nothing he can do about holy water, but crucifixes he can supply, and he hangs one pointedly in the dining room, overlooking the table. Jack eyes him sideways when he sees him wrapping his rosary around his wrist, but he doesn't comment.

"We have a guest joining us for dinner tonight," Will says quietly, "I hope you don't mind."

"You know I don't," Jack says. "This is your home too."

Will nods. "Thank you, Jack."

He doesn't say any more. He doesn't know what to say. Instead, he goes up to dress for dinner. He makes sure to station himself in the front hall before Hannibal is expected. There's something he needs to see for himself.

When the door knocker sounds, Will himself opens the panel and stands just over the threshold.

"Hannibal," he says softly. The breathlessness is mostly sincere. Hannibal wears the most gorgeous suit he's ever seen beneath his overcoat, a deep wine red that makes his skin and eyes gleam.

"Hello, Will," Hannibal greets, dipping his head in a bow. He proffers a single rose without so much as a cursory glance around.

Will stares at the bloom. At his gloved hand holding it. His ears burn at the pleasure he feels. He pushes it down. "Thank you."

Dimly he notices neither of them have moved. Mutely, he steps back. It's a fight to be deliberately impolite. Hannibal gazes at him, expression shifting just slightly.

The moment stretches longer, too long. Will feels his blush reach his face and his neck. "Please... come in," he whispers.

He sees only the single press of Hannibal's lips to indicate he's disturbed in any way. He sweeps across the threshold, handing Will the rose.

"Thank you." He sees as he takes it and lays it on the hall table that the stem has been carefully stripped of thorns.

"Are you quite well, Will?" Hannibal asks. "You look - tired."

"My work makes me tired," Will replies, carefully avoiding words like *terrified* or *hopeless*. He holds steady when Hannibal, having removed his gloves, steps close and takes his hands. He lifts one to his cheek as if testing the temperature against his own cool skin. It's startlingly familiar.

Will stares at the pale fringe of his eyelashes and shakes the crucifix out of the other one. The way he moves back is contained, easy. He gives Will a soft smile.

"I hope tonight isn't too much of an imposition, then."

"It isn't, are you hungry? Dinner will be served soon."

"Famished," Hannibal says smoothly.

"This way." He takes his coat and hat and hands them off to the housekeeper as she appears, nodding in thanks. "My employer will be joining us, I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all, it's a privilege."

Jack isn't down for dinner yet, but that's all right. Will accepts a glass of wine when they're seated at the table even knowing that he shouldn't. "How are you today?" he asks politely, stomach still churning.

"I'm well," Hannibal replies, tone echoing his formality. Too much courtesy, Will thinks helplessly. That's not what he wants, and he's sure it's not what Hannibal wants either. As if to stymie the breakdown physically, Hannibal reaches for him again, and this time Will allows it. "I've missed you," Hannibal says, voice low like a secret whispered in Will's ear. He bites his lip, voice hoarse.

"It's barely been a day."

"Even so."

God, he's so weak. Why is he letting his hand be held, tiny circles drawn over his pulse by one of Hannibal's thumbs? He takes a deep breath and tries not to close his eyes. Threshold, crucifix... silver... his head is swimming. Only the sound of footsteps in the hall rouses him.

Hannibal's hand falls away from his own. He stands, and Will pushes himself to his feet as well. Jack lets himself into the room.

"Good evening, Will." He nods at him, and then Hannibal. "Jack Crawford, this is Doctor Hannibal Lecter. He works at the Natural History Museum."

Hannibal solemnly offers a hand. "A pleasure to meet such an esteemed detective," he purrs, "I greatly admire the work you do."

"Oh?" Jack says, clearly flattered.

"Absolutely. Minds such as your own are essential to upholding the moral pillars of our society. Without law and order, where would we be?"

"In hell," Will grouches, more loudly than he'd meant to. Both Jack and Hannibal shoot him questioning looks. Will pardons himself with an apologetic wave. "I'm tired, sorry."

Hannibal exudes concern. Jack a bit less so. "If you need to go upstairs..."

"I think I'm just hungry," Will says, offering a thin smile.

"Well, in that case," Jack sits down at his place, reaching for the wine carafe.

Will takes a long sip of his own. Their starters will be served any moment. He'll just drink until he can eat.

Hannibal and Jack make pleasant conversation. At least, it starts out that way. After the veal is served, Will sees Hannibal pause, then his questions turn more specific.

"Have you any development on your Ripper case?" he asks, the question vaguely directed at both of them.

"We really can't discuss it," Jack replies, frowning over at Will.

"Oh, but can you discuss any of your other cases?" Hannibal presses. "It's all very educational."

"As a man of science, Hannibal is very inquisitive," Will mutters. They both look briefly at him, but they're busy eyeing one another.

"Is there a particular case you'd like to discuss, Doctor?"

Hannibal shrugs eloquently. "I must confess, I have read the most in the papers regarding all those unfortunate young girls, back in Louisiana- the Shrike, was he called? It's said he devoured their flesh."

Jack's mouth thins with distaste. "Sensationalism."

"Perhaps you'd set the record straight."

"For the sake of inquisitiveness," Jack replies slowly.

Hannibal smiles. "I appreciate your indulgence."

Jack grimaces and produces a very basic summary of the murders, avoiding details. Will can't stop watching Hannibal, fascinated. He's holding his silverware very delicately but doesn't seem to be unduly concerned by it. He still eats neatly and without reacting to the silver against his teeth.

"So you believe the killer's consumption was a mortal act of fatherly love gone wrong?" He asks. Jack gives Will a look over, clearly bemused by the nature of his interest.

"That's what Will believed, yes. He has an instinct for these things."

"For what makes killers kill?" Hannibal tilts his head at Will now. "I had no idea you were such a bloodhound, Will."

"Not always. We never found his daughter, Abigail. She vanished. Nothing left behind, hide nor hair."

"And there was plenty of hide to be found of the others, if I recall," Hannibal says, "tell me Will, where do your instincts tell you she is now?"

The remembering makes Will shiver. He can't answer, and so he shrugs, pouring himself more wine with shaking hands. Eyes sharp, Hannibal turns his attention back to Jack.

Teeth ground, Will tries not to be too obvious in his staring. If he's in pain, Hannibal is very good at concealing it. Except, perhaps, by the manner in which his conversation grows

steadily more barbed. Will has never even seen him drift into the vicinity of impolite before-except in his bloody visions. Jack is getting angry. Will can tell.

"A man who eats the flesh of others," he's saying, playing at Devil's advocate, "sounds more like a monster to me."

"He was a monster," Will interjects before he can stop himself, "anyone who could do that to another human being is a monster, no matter what. He had a sickness, and it made him eat his daughter."

"Is that what you think happened to her?"

It seems Hannibal knows rather more about these cases than he let on. Will is starting to have a sinking suspicion it's for a terrifying reason- that he knows something about the Shrike that had never truly occurred to Will until now.

Before the conversation can continue, he interrupts by asking the housekeeper to bring them coffee with dessert: "I think some of us are getting a little overzealous from drink."

Jack is still frowning, but Hannibal merely looks amused. When he smiles, his teeth glint. Will can't stop looking at them.

"Are you becoming overzealous from drink, Will?" He asks innocently.

Will doesn't say *if only*, but he wants to. He watches Hannibal glance to Jack, a predator's red glint in his eye. A flash of panic strikes him.

"Hannibal," he says, all in a rush.

"Will." Hannibal turns his attention on him with another slow smile but his eyes don't soften much.

"I need some air," Will says, quickly, "will you walk with me?"

"Gladly."

Jack says nothing as they rise, but his eyes follow. Will isn't looking forward to their next conversation. If they have one.

The air is crisp and cold outside, the scent of fresh rain rising from the cobbles. Will pulls his scarf more tightly around his neck, as if that will keep him safe. Beside him, Hannibal glides, shadowlike. Will's mouth is entirely too dry to speak. They walk a hundred meters, two silent specters, and Will's skin speckles with nerves.

Eventually, Hannibal regards him, that strange opalescence reflecting from his pupils, as if the moon had taken up residence in wine colored skies. "Must I go now, Will?" he asks softly. "Before you summon some new way to hurt me?"

"Hurt you," Will echoes in disbelief.

Hannibal holds out his palms, the pads of his fingers mottled with something like black bruising even in the dim glow of the street lamps. "An allergy," he says, somewhat tartly.

Will's lip curls briefly. "How unfortunate." He makes himself stand still when Hannibal comes closer, quick as smoke, to touch his cheek.

"Thank you for an enchanting evening, beloved," he says softly. "Until next time."

"No," Will blurts. He can't leave now. God knows what will happen if he leaves now. Will has no earthly way of stopping him.

Hannibal tilts his head. "No? Worried you won't get an opportunity to kill me if I go?"

It hurts Will to hear the words. He touches his own stomach as if gripped by inertia, unsure why the thought frightens him so much.

"Something else then," Hannibal says, quick and sly, "perhaps you're more afraid that you can't."

He is. He's so afraid of what he should do being what he won't. When he doesn't speak, Hannibal's face softens.

"Beloved." He touches Will's cheek again, one cool thumb smoothing under his eye. "Come with me."

Will bites his lip. "Very well." He thinks he sees surprise in Hannibal's face. When he holds his hand out, Will takes it without hesitation. Let Hannibal be surprised. It's up to Will to act. Somehow.

They continue in the familiar direction. The streets seem deserted, cold and misty with it. Will suspects it's purely because he's with Hannibal. Life seems to flee from him. Unless it doesn't know better, of course. Like Will.

"Where are we going?" he asks.

"The museum," Hannibal says, voice cool like the evening. They walk the rest of the way in grave silence. Hannibal lets them in through the staff entrance with a worn iron key, and in the stifling dark, Will smells death and stone. His breathing sounds very loud. Hannibal's is entirely inaudible as he lights a lantern.

"What are we doing?" Will asks quietly.

"You tell me, Will."

He tries not to think of the small, single-shot pistol tucked into his jacket pocket. He has no idea why he's here, except that it was the only way he could keep Jack's blood off the floor of the dining room.

"What do you want with me?" he asks, stiff with fear.

"To love you, Will," Hannibal replies softly. "To make you mine. It's what I've always wanted."

"To use me," Will corrects coldly, "to take back what you think you're owed."

"What is it you think I am owed? Other than happiness."

"You're owed nothing."

Now Hannibal looks sorrowful. "What do you think I am, Will? Truly."

"The man who has killed twelve people since arriving in London," Will breathes, "and many more besides that."

"The conclusions that mind of yours comes to are truly fascinating. Is that all?"

"You're not human," Will says weakly.

Hannibal pauses, and Will sees that they've wandered into a smaller display hall, lined with shrouded mounts and half-filled display cases, the silhouettes ghoulish and looming in the half-light. Hannibal's nocturnal creatures exhibit, he thinks with a panicked shiver.

"What am I, then, Will?"

"What shall I call you? Vampire? The Devil himself, like the Romanians do?"

Hannibal's mouth curls in a faint, humorless smirk. He looks around, the bleak lantern making him gaunt and skeletal for a moment. "Dracula. Nosferatu. Lucifer. They're all spokes of the same wheel, aren't they, beloved?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Of course you do. You're intimate with darkness, Will, with craving. You've sheltered it all your life, inside you like a guttering candle flame." He takes a step closer. "Those people out there; the man who keeps you in his house and points you like a gun. That God you served for years with nothing but pain in return. The ones who use you, but don't want you. They don't love you, Will. Not like I love you."

"Is this love, Hannibal? It feels like the same old torment to me."

"Torment." He repeats it like it tastes bad. "All I have done from the moment we met is adore you. Just the way you are." He steps forwards and Will automatically steps back. He misjudges and backs into an abandoned ladder and Hannibal stops. His face is grave. "They shun you as you shun us, and still you don't see it."

"Of course I see it," Will whispers.

"Do you? We are God's creatures, all of us, Will. He tests us, and when we fail, he casts us aside. What is left to us when devotion can't save us?"

"Making our own way," Will replies.

Hannibal nods. "This is the only way I have left to me. Creeping in the shadows. That's where I first found you. You're a creature of midnight too, Will. You just won't admit it to yourself."

Will steels himself. "Don't presume to know me," he says in a low voice.

Hannibal tilts his head. "You don't think I do? Then tell me what you are."

"What if you don't like what I say?"

"As ever, I don't want you as anything but what you are."

Each time he says it, it causes a fresh pain in Will's chest, like something inside has cracked or torn. He closes his eyes tight in a flinch, then opens them again as he pulls out the pistol, pointing it directly at Hannibal's heart. Hannibal doesn't move except to turn his face aside. He closes his eyes.

"Don't," Will hisses.

"Don't?" Hannibal echoes softly.

"Don't act like you've just accepted it."

"I am, of course, as a scientist, desperately curious to see if it will work."

Will stalls. "Why?"

"Nothing ever has."

Will stifles the horrible, clawing empathy and cocks the hammer. "We'll see." His hand tremors a little, and he tries to gather the courage to pull the trigger.

Hannibal just waits, still and patient as a tiger. He must see the doubt rising in Will, because he speaks softly.

"Hesitation serves neither of our purposes, Will."

He steps closer. Will lets him. His hand stays steady, but Hannibal's fingers close gently over the barrel.

"Is that truly what you want, Will? To be alone again?"

"No," Will chokes on it, "but it's what has been given to me."

"By that loving God of yours? You don't have to accept it. You don't have to deny yourself."

"What will you do to me?"

"Nothing. I want simply to give you unconditional acceptance."

"What else?" He feels Hannibal lift the gun from his hand, setting it aside.

Hannibal leans back in to touch his cheek. "Just love, my darling."

It wounds Will more than any weapon. He thinks he gasps, eyes seared with tears and head automatically shaking in a denial. Hannibal hushes him gently, pulling him in, cradling him close. This is the word of the Devil, Will tries to remind himself. King of Liars, Tempter of Men. But all he can feel when he looks at Hannibal is sincerity.

"What do you want in return?" he asks, fear shaking him. A tiny voice inside says it's not truly fear of Hannibal that shakes him, but of himself.

"Only what I give to you, and only if you can spare it," he promises.

Their foreheads touch. A bitter, terror-fueled surge of realization goes through Will when their lips touch: he can't give this up. He's made his choice after all. Hannibal's palm is cool on his jaw, and Will presses against him suddenly, needing contact. His self-loathing makes itself known as a half-sob. Hannibal only gathers him closer, soothing with endearments.

"Precious boy," he breathes, "I can give you what he only promised. I will never deny you." He kisses him again, light presses of his lips across his face. "Say the word, Will. Only say the word. No one shall ever use you again. No looking upon things that mutilate your imagination and invade your dreams. All you have to do is say it."

Will closes his eyes, clutching him tighter, and nods.

"Yes."

It vibrates through the air like a bell. Hannibal whispers his name as if winded by him. When he looks back down on Will, his eyes are like flames. His lips against Will's throat sear with intimacy. The scrape of his teeth is a prickling promise of things to come.

He presses enough to split skin, and Will lets him. Tilts his head back, and Hannibal makes a soft noise and cradles his skull in his palm. The blood trickles hot down Will's throat, only a crimson thread, the rest caught by Hannibal's tongue. Will moans softly, pain cut with a sudden wave of desire like he's never known.

He's backed against the wall then, Hannibal's hands so gentle, never pushing. They hold him up, though there's a fine tremble in them that he can feel. A rush of light-headedness makes him clutch at fabric and muscle, but Hannibal doesn't let him stumble.

"Come home," Hannibal sighs against his skin. Will can only nod.

"Yes."

*

He's not sure how it happens, only that he finds himself again in the big black bed, stripped bare and lavished with touches. More nips of Hannibal's teeth too, following the path of the arteries, up his arms and to his chest. He inhales deeply against Will's sternum, and Will

fancies the blood must smell different there. He daren't ask. He wonders if Hannibal can hear his heart beat, fierce and fast. He's sure the answer, as ever, is yes.

Hannibal's mouth tracks down his belly slowly now. Will twists his hands into the sheets, trying not to beg out loud. He's still drowsy with blood loss, the low vibration of dread a current under his desire. He can feel the drying trickles from a few deep bites.

Hannibal breathes hot against his tender inner thigh and looks up at Will. "If I wanted to kill you quickly, I'd sever the artery here," he murmurs.

"You're not - are you going to kill me?" Will asks muzzily.

"What did I tell you, Will? I said I'd never harm you."

"Harm is... relative."

"I would argue that in the case of death, it isn't. You're either dead, or you aren't."

"I can't believe you're arguing semantics with me right now," Will breathes. But... yes, he can.

"I'm not going to kill you," Hannibal affirms. He takes Will slowly into his mouth and Will whimpers: maybe not like that. Everywhere Hannibal touches him feels like it catches fire. It's more pleasure than he feels capable of feeling right now. He needs something to let him open up.

Hannibal's hand steadying on his stomach helps somewhat. Will can feel a crackle in the heavy air, like a storm setting in. He's in the mood for some lightning.

He arches into the sensation and lets his mind roam unchecked; lets the creeping fingers of it wrap around Hannibal and the house and its many dead occupants. He flexes, just a little, like a cat stretching its claws.

Mine, he thinks.

Hannibal hums in soft agreement. *Yours, all of it*.

His voice is everywhere. Will grasps his shoulders and tugs him up into a kiss.

"Hannibal," he groans softly.

"Whatever you want, Will. Tell me and it's yours."

"Make me yours."

Hannibal nips at his lower lip. "Truly?"

"Truly." His voice breaks on the word.

Hannibal doesn't bother to hide his pleasure. He kisses Will again, deep and adoring. "Beloved," he murmurs against his jaw, "beautiful witch prince, all my own."

Will accepts another kiss, and then pushes them over with force to sit astride Hannibal's hips, rocking against him with purpose. Hannibal gazes up at him, hands caressing.

"Give me your hands. Get me ready," Will commands.

With an amused huff, Hannibal stretches to the bedside for something to slick the path of his fingers. Will holds onto him as they move into position, and Hannibal makes another rich, exultant noise at their kiss, raw need, a hunger as of yet unslaked by their previous union. His fingers pass wet between Will's thighs, kneading gently when they find their target. Gasping, Will arches to receive them. It's as if he can feel Hannibal's touch through his entire body.

His teeth against Will's throat complete it like a circuit. This time when his canines sink in Will moans and quivers, struck by their closeness. It makes him surge his hips down hard and fast, greedy for more, and Hannibal's expression is alive with pure veneration. He sighs against Will's skin, mouth smeared red, the air between them coppery with blood and sex.

"I love you, so completely."

His voice is like a prayer; honest in a way that makes Will flinch. Hannibal stills, and Will chokes on his emotions.

"You mean it."

"Of course."

Will twists his hands into his hair and squeezes. "Hurry. I need you."

He knows he's being shockingly demanding, but Hannibal doesn't do anything but comply, opening Will up gently and quickly and then finally letting Will curl over his body and push down onto his slicked cock with a shaky cry.

"Hannibal," he gasps. "Give me your teeth again."

"Will," Hannibal breathes, gripping him close.

"Do it," Will orders, and Hannibal dips his head to lap up the leftover trickles of blood. The slow, insistent movements of his hips jar Hannibal's breath.

"Beautiful boy," he says in between. He sits up to grip him closer, and Will whines at his hands on his jaw as he bites deep. He actually thinks he feels his heart stutter this time. He's lightheaded, flooded with feelings, fulfilled. Filled with heat and welcoming darkness.

Everything around them narrows down, just the searing beam of a spotlight on Hannibal's touch and the sheer bliss of their joining, like their love is a great beast, finally let loose to devour them whole. He loses himself in it completely; strokes down hard and urgent with his hips until Hannibal is panting against the wound on his throat, one hand curling tight around Will to pull him closer to the edge.

"Beloved," he whispers again.

Will buries his face into his neck and cries out. He's so close, balanced on the edge, head a kaleidoscope of sinful want and dizzy love. In the distance, he can hear the drumroll of thunder; dark clouds on the edge of his mind, ready to drench London in rain. Let it come. Let them roll in and sweep over him.

It crests with his orgasm, a lightning crack that illuminates the room, rendering Hannibal's face skull-like below him. Hannibal joins him in the next moment, the embrace of darkness and the smell of ozone. The storm outside brings rain as fierce as nails striking the windows, the sky still split with cracks of light.

Will breathes hard, still swimming in delirium; a dying, post-coital haze. He feels infinite, washed clean by the rain and hollowed out by sharing his blood, and he finds that Hannibal has crept into all the empty places.

He almost startles when Hannibal pulls away, but it's only to retrieve something from the bedside, glinting sharp in the path of the flickering tempest outside: a blade, and a crystal flute.

"Just another moment, Will," he whispers. "It won't hurt so much soon."

The movements of his wrists elegant and refined, he nicks one with a practiced eye, letting the deep red ribbons of it flow into the glass, concentration steady.

It's so much easier than Will thought it would be to let himself be eased up; to accept the glass and the small measure of blood inside it.

"Will it hurt?" he asks.

"No. It will be gradual, you'll barely notice the change. I prefer a more elegant communion, but unfortunately this is the best way."

Satisfied, Will tips the contents of the glass back, swallowing it down. He smiles at the rapture on Hannibal's face: surprise and adoration.

"I truly believe you were made for me," he tells Will softly, setting the glass aside, easing him back down into the plush pillows. Eyes stinging, Will cups Hannibal's face and presses their foreheads together.

"So do I."

They lie together, listening to the rain, and Will drifts in and out of sleep under the gentle swirl of Hannibal's fingers. Somewhere in the house, a grandfather clock chimes, and Will stirs.

"Hannibal." He's watching him attentively, still petting at his cooling skin. Outside, the wind still howls.

"Will. What's on your mind?"

"I want to leave this place."

"I will take you anywhere you wish. Tell me where, we can leave whenever you want."

"Somewhere we can be alone."

"This is... all you want?"

Will nods. "You are all I want."

Hannibal watches his face, and then nods, kissing him slow and adoring. "Then we'll go now."

"What about your - children?" Will feels that is the proper term to use, though he shudders a bit.

"Chiyoh will take care of them."

"And you?"

"I will take care of you."

"And she'll take care of them- until you come back?"

"Even if I never do." He touches Will's face. "I have you. I need nothing else."

Will's breath shakes out. Outside, the rain pounds harder against the glass. "Good," he whispers.

He sees flames in his mind's eye, but feels only warmth. Hannibal kisses the centre of his chest.

"Get dressed," he says gently, "I know the perfect place."

Will nods and cleans himself up with only slightly shaking hands, moving slow. Even so, he doesn't feel nearly so wretched as he ought to. He tries not to think too closely about what that might mean.

When they're both put back together, Hannibal meets Will at the window, and they look out at the clouds, charcoal grey and impenetrable.

"Those are yours," Hannibal murmurs.

Will nods. "I alone deserve them."

"You deserve so much." He cups Will's cheek, sounding so sure Will's heart aches. Hannibal soothes him with another long, aching kiss. There's a knock on the door, but Hannibal doesn't pull fully away.

"Give us a few moments please, Chiyoh." He looks at Will again. "There's a carriage waiting for us."

Will can only laugh. "And my things?"

"I'll get you new things." He kisses Will again, lingeringly. It seems so simple like that.
"Nothing you won't miss?"

Will thinks about it, then he shakes his head. "Nothing."

Hannibal kisses him again. "Then let's go, beloved."

Will looks out the window one more time; the lantern lit there. A couple of moths drift over the glass, pewter wings pearlescent in the dark. Little nightmares, frantically scrabbling for the light.

He's happiest in the dark. He always was.

"Let's go."

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